The New Criterion

November 1999

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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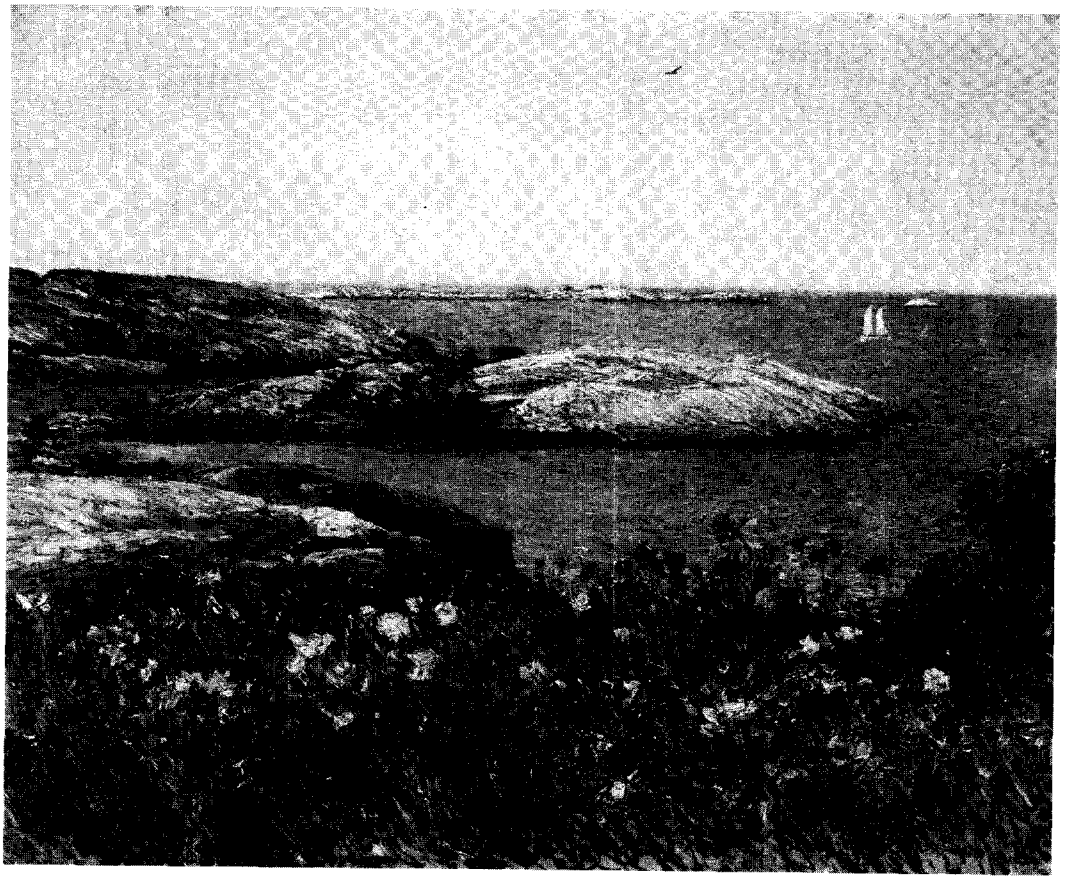
CHILDE HASSAM: An American Impressionist



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The New Criterion *November 1999*

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Elizabeth Spires's most recent book is *The Mouse of Amherst*, a children's book about a mouse who lives in Emily Dickinson's room and writes poetry.

Mark Steyn's *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight* was published last spring by Routledge.

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Notes & Comments: November 1999

Better late . . .

NEWS FLASH! In the last days of the last year of the twentieth century, *The New York Review of Books* has made an amazing and horrifying discovery: that the teaching of literature in our university English departments is in deep—well, let us say trouble. Just imagine! So grave has the situation now suddenly been discovered to be by the *New York Review*'s editors that they have thrown all caution to the winds and actually published an article in their issue of November 4 that poses the question: "What does it all mean? Should the teaching of English be given a decent burial, or is there life in it yet?" While the answer to this question remains moot, both in the article and in the academy itself, its author—Andrew Delbanco, the Julian Clarence Levi Professor of the Humanities at Columbia University—doesn't hesitate, except in one important regard, to describe the wounds that have been inflicted on the patient he has been called upon to attend under emergency conditions.

What now passes for the teaching of literature in our university English departments, writes Professor Delbanco, "has come to reflect some of the worst aspects of our culture: obsessing about sex, posturing about real social inequities while leaving them unaddressed, and participating with gusto in the love/hate cult of celebrities." And further: "In what is perhaps the largest irony of all, the teaching of English has been penetrated, even saturated, by the market mentality it decries. The theory factory (yesterday's theory is deficient, today's is new and improved) has become expert in planned obsolescence." There is even a good word for Lionel Trilling in this article, and a hint, quickly balanced by equivocation, that some of the new fields of study in the English departments—"feminist, gay and lesbian, and postcolonial studies, the New Historicism . . . and, most recently, 'eco-criticism'"—might just not be as wonderful as they have been claimed to be.

Let us acknowledge, then, that there is much that is excellent in Professor Delbanco's article, which is called "The Decline and Fall of Literature" and reviews a slew of recent publications on the subject. Yet it must also be said that there is not much in the article that will be new to readers of *The New Criterion*. It was in our issue of December 1983, after all, that we published René Wellek's essay "Destroying Literary Studies," which sounded the alarm about the very developments that have now brought the study of literature in our universities to the brink of extinction. From his position as a scholar in comparative literature at Yale University, Professor Wellek understood exactly what was at stake:

> Today [the] whole edifice of literary study has come under an attack that is not merely the

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> normal criticism of certain aspects of a changing discipline but an attempt to destroy literary studies from the inside. The attempt seems to have succeeded in certain academic circles; it has enlisted the support of a number of journals and has affected many students, apparently all over the country. It has hardly dislodged or even modified up till now the practice of the vast majority of teachers and students of literature. But it has had considerable publicity and, if it should be generally effective and find many adherents among the younger generation, may spell the breakdown or even the abolition of all traditional literary scholarship and teaching.

For issuing this warning, René Wellek was denounced by the then president of the Modern Language Association, Professor Helen Vendler, as an "old-fogey"—so was another eminent literary scholar, W. Jackson Bate—as the rush to complete "the breakdown or even the abolition of all traditional literary scholarship and teaching" proceeded on its merry, nihilistic course.

Why was it left to a few conservative writers—our own Roger Kimball, author of *Tenured Radicals*, prominently among them—to resist this destructive course, which began in the literature departments of the universities and soon spread to virtually every branch of the humanities and even into the law schools? The truth is, the liberals both in and out of the universities felt obliged to lend support to this anti-literary, anti-humanistic, anti-social cultural movement because it was correctly seen to be a coefficient of the radical counterculture of the late 1960s and 1970s. To take up a position against the campaign to "deconstruct" the legacy of Western civilization was tantamount to declaring oneself to be of a conservative turn of mind, and, in the universities in the aftermath of the 1960s counterculture, that meant professional suicide in all but very exceptional circumstances. It is because Professor Delbanco could not bring himself to confront the patently political character of this assault on literary study that his article on "The Decline and Fall of Literature" remains a flawed and, in some respects, an even cowardly critique. It is also remarkably ungenerous, if not actually unforgiving, in its refusal to acknowledge that, until recently, it was largely left to writers outside the academy to sound the alarm about a development he new regards as dire. But had he openly acknowledged these conservative precursors, would *The New York Review* have published Professor Delbanco's article? We doubt it. Still, though the hour is late and the patient barely breathing, we welcome even this flawed attempt to set the record straight.

Alexandre Kojève, KGB spy

Ideas have consequences. We suppose that is one lesson of the recent revelation by the French secret service that the Russian-born French philosopher and civil servant Alexandre Kojève was a Soviet agent for some thirty years. It would be difficult to overstate Kojève's eminence in the pantheon of twentieth-century French intellectuals. Daniel Johnson, who reported the story in the London *Daily Telegraph*, noted that "Kojève's subterranean influence is ubiquitous. His ideas echo around our political arena. Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' is recycled Kojève. So is Tony Blair's vision of a post-conservative, post-national, post-political, post-historical Europe."

In intellectual and cultural terms, Kojève's influence is even more extensive. Born Alexander Kochevnikoff in Moscow in 1902, Kojève left Russia in 1920, going first to Poland and then to Germany, where he encountered two life-changing personalities: his uncle Wassily Kandinsky, who became a close friend, and the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, which seduced him utterly. In 1926, Kojève moved to Paris, changed his name, and became a French citizen. In 1933, he embarked on what is probably the most famous philosophical seminar of the century: his Marxist-inspired, line-by-line dis-

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section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. His students included André Breton, Georges Bataille, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eric Weil, Jacques Lacan, and Raymond Queneau: the good, the bad, and the ugly of twentieth-century French intellectual life. Among Kojève's later admirers was Allan Bloom, who described him as "the most brilliant man I ever met." Aron thought him "more intelligent than Sartre."

Recalling Kojève's seminar in his *Mémoires* (1983), Aron wrote that "the subject was both world history and the *Phenomenology*. The latter shed light on the former. Everything took on meaning. Even those who were suspicious of historical providence . . . did not resist the magician: at the moment, the intelligibility he conferred on time and events was enough of a proof." It is difficult for the uninitiated—namely, anyone who did not come under the spell of Kojève's personality—to understand his influence. The printed version of his lectures—*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1968)—are almost comical in their fuzzy megalomania. (Though in this, it has to be admitted, they closely resemble the teachings of Hegel himself.) The book is full of statements like this: "there is History *because* there is Philosophy and *in order that* there may be Philosophy."

Although like Hegel he professed to believe that history—or at any rate History—came to an end with the *Phenomenology*, in 1945 Kojève nevertheless decided to join the Ministry of Economy and Finance because, Aron reports, he "wanted to know how it [history] happened. . . . Like Plato, he wanted to advise a tyrant, in the shadows exercise influence over the visible actors." For more than twenty years, Kojève (who died in 1968) succeeded in just that. He was by all accounts a brilliant negotiator. Dreaming of a resurgent Latin Empire, he was instrumental behind the scenes in the formation of the European Economic Community and encouraged de Gaulle to block British membership. If nothing else, Kojève was a living testimony to the mesmerizing power of personality. Even Aron was taken in by Kojève. Although he noted that in 1938–1939, Kojève referred to himself as a "strict Stalinist," Aron believed that Kojève later abandoned his Stalinism for the sake of serving France. "Did there," Aron asks, "remain in him a kind of Russian patriotism, hidden and rationalized? I don't doubt it, although there is no question that he served the French nation, freely chosen, with unshakable loyalty."

It turns out, though, that Kojève was unshakably loyal only to the Hegelian ideal of the World Historical Personality. The young Hegel idolized Napoleon when he was on his way up, referring to him in 1806 as *diese Weltseele*—"this world soul." Stalin was Kojève's Napoleon: a tyrant through whom the forces of history seemed to converge. The French government has not yet released Kojève's dossier, so it is not clear how much damage he did in his decades of espionage. He was the confidante of de Gaulle and Giscard d'Estaing, and doubtless had access to numerous French secrets. As Mr. Johnson points out, this "miraculous mandarin turns out to have been a malevolent mole. Nobody of his eminence has ever been exposed as a traitor on this scale before." The French, though they have exposed Kojève, have yet to condemn him. Perhaps that is a sign of the lingering influence of his ideas. If it is true that we are at the dawn of the "post-historical" era, then working as a spy for the greatest tyranny of the twentieth century might be able to be dialectically interpreted as a "progressive" gesture. Then, too, many of the people Kojève worked with are still alive. Honest condemnation might be embarrassing or worse. And after all, Kojève was universally admired for his beguiling brilliance. For our part, the saga of Alexandre Kojève's treachery reminds us of Walter Bagehot's comment on Ruskin's harebrained economic ideas: "In the faculty of writing nonsense, stupidity is no match for genius." Bagehot might have added: In the faculty of perpetrating evil, common sense is no match for the Hegelian dialectic.

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The elephant in the gallery, or the lessons of "Sensation"

by Roger Kimball

Today everybody innovates. Deliberately, methodically. And the innovations are deliberately and methodically made startling. Only it now turns out not to be true that all startling art is necessarily innovative or new art. . . . It has become apparent that art can have a startling impact without really being or saying anything startling—or new. The character itself of being startling, spectacular, or upsetting has become conventionalized, part of safe good taste.
—Clement Greenberg (1969)

I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge, and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.
—Marcel Duchamp (1946)

William Blake discerned a world in a grain of sand. Thanks to Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and an exhibition called "Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, we see ourselves in a clump of elephant dung. Should we like what we see?

It was really the mayor, of course, who made "Sensation" the sensation of the season. As all the world knows by now, shortly before the exhibition was due to open, Mr. Giuliani denounced it as "outrageous" and full of "sick stuff." Exhibit "A" was a blasphemous depiction of the Virgin Mary festooned with cutouts from pornographic magazines and—the *pièce de résistance*—a clump or two of elephant dung. The mayor might have mentioned other items. The pubescent female mannequins, for example, studded with erect penises, vaginas, and anuses, fused together in various postures of sexual coupling, or the portrait of a child molester and murderer made from what looks like a child's hand prints, or the bisected animals (pigs, cows) in plexiglass tanks full of formaldehyde.

"Sick stuff" indeed. Although acknowledging that, if paid for privately, such an exhibition would be protected by the First Amendment, Mr. Giuliani insisted that it did not deserve public support. "You don't have a right to government subsidy for desecrating somebody else's religion," he said. "[I]f you are a government-subsidized enterprise, then you can't do things that desecrate the most personal and deeply held views of people in society." If the exhibition opened, he warned, he would do everything he could to cut off city funds for the museum—about $7 million, a third of the institution's budget.

Good luck. The exhibition opened as planned and seems to be drawing record crowds at $9.75 a pop for tickets. Charles Saatchi, the British ad-man and art speculator, must be beside himself with glee; it is not every private collector that can get a major public art museum to preview his collection for him in the U.S.—or get the auction house Christie's to help pay for the exhibition. And all this publicity! How the market values of his artists must be soaring. Yes, the city cancelled its monthly payments

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to the museum and is seeking to have its lease revoked. But the museum has engaged Floyd Abrams, the famous First Amendment lawyer, to sue the city for infringing on its First Amendment rights. The American Civil Liberties Union has lumbered into action on behalf of the museum. (Though imagine the ACLU's response if the museum had tried to exhibit an image of the Virgin "straight," e.g., in a crèche at Christmas!) All across the country the so-called "arts community" and its supporters have stampeded like the proverbial herd of independent minds, condemning the mayor for attempting to "censor" the artists and stifle the progress of "challenging" art. The liberal establishment has contracted, as Hamlet might have put it, into one furious brow of woe. Nazi Germany has been invoked. So has Stalinist Russia and Joseph McCarthy.

Consider the performance of *The New York Times*. The last time I checked, our paper of record had published more than fifty articles about "Sensation." There have been blistering editorials lambasting the mayor for censorship and "hysteria," news stories detailing public support for the Brooklyn Museum, a fawning profile of the artist who made the Madonna decorated with porn and elephant dung, an exposé chiding those few arts institutions—like Carnegie Hall and the Museum of the City of New York—that declined to sign a petition in support of the Brooklyn Museum (what about *their* right to free speech and a dissenting opinion?). There has also been a steady flow of critical pieces regurgitating the standard liberal line showing—or purporting to show—how "innovative" artists through the ages have been misunderstood, pilloried, or neglected, only to emerge later (often too late!) as acknowledged geniuses. One particularly obtuse piece, by the *Times*'s chief art critic Michael Kimmelman, even compared the controversy over "Sensation" to the difficulties Paolo Veronese had with church authorities in 1573 over his painting "Feast in the House of Levi" (how do *you* spell "anachronism"?). And so on. According to *The Idler*, an Internet magazine, the *Times* has already published more front-page stories about "Sensation" than it published about the extermination of the Jews in World War II.

"What mighty contests rise from trivial things"? In part. But there are signs that the controversy over "Sensation" may mark the beginning of a new chapter not only in the debate over public funding of so-called "challenging" art, but also in our understanding of the relation between the public sphere and the limits of acceptable speech. Whatever the courts decide, we will be able to look back on the controversy over "Sensation" as a casebook of lessons about cultural life at the end of the twentieth century. The lessons, although hardly unambiguous, can tell us something about the value we place on art today, about the relation between art and freedom of speech, and about the competing claims that manners and morals have on our allegiance.

Let's start with the word "art." In any traditional sense of the word, the objects in "Sensation" can barely be said to exist. As Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, pointed out in one of the few dissenting op-ed pieces the *Times* has deigned to publish about the controversy, to see "Sensation" is to recognize that "the emperor has no clothes." Considered *as art*, the objects on view are pathetic or worse.

But of course aesthetic quality is not really the issue. Mr. de Montebello plaintively noted that artistic quality, not politics, *ought* to be the "crucial issue" when it comes to exhibitions of art. He is right. But the fact is that considerations of artistic quality are completely irrelevant to events like "Sensation." This is in large part a legacy of our culture's mindless love affair with the avant-garde. One of the many canards that has been called upon to work overtime during this controversy centers on the idea that important new art always or at least generally shocks, and therefore is rejected by, established taste. Sometimes the idea is formulated in an even more extreme form:

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that important new art *sets out* to shock established taste: that being "shocking" ("provocative," "transgressive"—what used to be called obscene or blasphemous) is the very raison d'être of art.

Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, gave typical expression to this cliché in *his* op-ed piece for *The New York Times* (doubtless written in response to Mr. de Montebello). Assuring his readers that the work of many of the artists represented in "Sensation" is "serious, thoughtful, and daring," Mr. Lowry castigated our society's philistine "resistance to the new." We need, Mr. Lowry wrote, "constantly to remind ourselves that artists reviled or forgotten in one era become revered in another. Innovation in the arts occurs by pushing the boundaries of aesthetic and social norms, by reconfiguring what we see and know."

"Reconfiguring" is a nice word. What do you suppose Mr. Lowry means by it here? While you ponder that, note that his contention does not itself reconfigure anything. It merely transcribes the conventional wisdom, according to which artists are engaged not only in aesthetic or artistic innovation, but also in *social*, i.e. moral, innovation. Mr. Lowry makes it clear that he thinks both sorts of innovation are highly laudable. He also thinks they require a special effort on our part. "To work with contemporary art," he says, "is to understand that new ideas require a great deal of patience and openness."

Just about everything that could be wrong with Mr. Lowry's observations *is* wrong. In the first place, it is by no means the case that art of the past typically challenged established taste, much less that it set out deliberately to do so. On the contrary, throughout most of history, art has reflected and reinforced established taste. The image of the artist as an outsider, "transgressing" conventional aesthetic or societal norms, is a dubious hold-over from nineteenth-century Romanticism. Secondly, if it is *sometimes* true that "artists reviled or forgotten in one era become revered in another," the opposite is also true: that some, indeed many, artists revered in one era are promptly reviled and forgotten in the next. Thirdly, Mr. Lowry harps on our society's "fear of the new." But in fact our society has made a positive fetish of novelty, not least in the arts. Far from suffering from a "resistance to the new," we are addicted to it: we can hardly see anything else.

It is ironical, then, that "the new" has long since lost its novelty value. The search for the new has been a staple of artistic practice for over a century. Without exception, the objects in "Sensation" are banal, repulsive, or both. None is aesthetically new. Anyone familiar with the history of Dada and Surrealism has seen it all before: the pornography, the pathological fascination with decay and mutilation, the toying with blasphemy (dressed up, occasionally, as a new religiosity).

> I "made up" the putrefaction of the donkeys with great pots of sticky glue which I poured over them. Also I emptied their eye-sockets and made them larger by hacking them out with scissors. In the same way I furiously cut their mouths open to make the rows of teeth show to better advantage, and I added several jaws to each mouth, so that it would appear that although the donkeys were already rotting they were vomiting up a little more of their own death.

That is Salvador Dalí in 1942, recounting his work for the Surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*. Damien Hirst has nothing on Dalí.

Well, perhaps Mr. Hirst and his peers do have one advantage—a commercial, not an aesthetic, advantage—over Dalí. When Dalí was active, there were still the remnants of resistance to his pathological antics among people concerned with high culture. Such resistance is now vanishing. Which brings me to the elephant in the gallery. Presupposed by Mr. Lowry's remarks—and in this he merely echoes received liberal opinion—is the notion that exhibitions like "Sensation" "challenge" established taste. But the truth is, of course, that they *are* established taste. Exhibitions like "Sensation" are a

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dime-a-dozen these days. They fill the special exhibition galleries of virtually every art museum the world over. How could anything so obvious have been overlooked?

In the weeks before "Sensation" opened and the mayor intervened, the Brooklyn Museum did everything it could to play up the show's outrageous nature. It proudly announced that "T-shirts, including one packaged with a condom, with a choice of 'Safe' or 'Unsafe' emblazoned on it" would be for sale in the gift shop. It even sent around a mock "Health Warning" cautioning potential viewers that "the contents of this exhibition may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic," and so forth. Subsequently, the museum purchased the cover art for an issue of *The Village Voice* depicting Mayor Giuliani as the Devil posed leeringly behind a picture of the Madonna. Like other arts institutions these days, the Brooklyn Museum wants the publicity attached to outraging public taste but not the outrage. It wants to "transgress" boundaries, but only if the result is applause and increased attendance, not censure. Most of the time, of course, such institutions get what they want: freedom without obligation, dispensation to act like a spoiled adolescent without penalty.

Once upon a time, as everyone knows, the avant-garde really did "challenge" bourgeois taste. But that challenge effectively came to an end with Abstract Expressionism. That was the last time established cultural opinion mounted any serious resistance to a new art form. Established taste ridiculed Abstract Expressionism and then within a few years found it embraced as great art. How mortifying! The safest way to prevent such an embarrassment from happening again was simply to embrace everything. Make "the new" one's gravamen of taste. Lobotomize one's aesthetic and moral faculties in order to remain trendy.

Since then, it has been capitulation all the way. Bourgeois taste has scrambled to keep up with avant-garde, or so-called avant-garde, practice. ("So-called" because what is referred to as "cutting-edge" art these days is not *avant* anything: it is just business as usual.) This is why mainstream establishment institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Brooklyn Museum can mount exhibitions of the latest art-world freak and be sure of attracting the cream of New York society to the black-tie dinner celebrating the opening. It used to be that the Salon looked to the past and resisted aesthetic innovation. The Salon of today insists on the *appearance* of innovation and forgets the past. We laugh at the hapless critics who abused Cézanne and ignored van Gogh. It won't be long before we are laughing—some of us have already begun—at the critics who celebrate garbage in the solemn tones of aesthetic delectation. Consider Michael Kimmelman's delicious pronouncement in *The New York Times Magazine* recently that Matthew Barney is "the most important American artist of his generation." Barney's *oeuvre* consists of things like "Field Dressing (Orifill)," a video, Mr. Kimmelman explains, that shows the artist "naked climbing up a pole and cables and applying dollops of Vaseline to his orifices." Like the artists in "Sensation," Matthew Barney is "important" only because he tests the limits of parody. He is part of what I have elsewhere called the trivialization of outrage. It is too bad that Evelyn Waugh isn't around to do justice to the comedy.

It has been a long time since you could count on the word "art" having much substantive content. These days, "art" is a deeply equivocal term. It retains its old meaning —"the production of the beautiful in a graphic or plastic medium"—but it has also acquired a new, purely *honorific* meaning. After Marcel Duchamp finished exhibiting an ordinary bottle rack and a urinal, a logical limit had been glimpsed. The effect of Duchamp's pranks was to point out that *anything* could be art. All it took was getting people to agree to call something art. A crushed Buick? No problem. A dead horse? Yes, of course. The artist's feces? By all means: a safe bet for the Turner Prize.

You might think that the proliferation of bogus art would lead to a sharp devaluation

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of art. But this has not happened, at least so far as the public's appetite is concerned. (The question of a general lowering of aesthetic quality is another matter.) Indeed, getting something recognized as art is like acquiring a union card: you instantly receive all sorts of fringe benefits—potential financial benefits, of course, but also what might be called *moral* or *metaphysical* benefits. A juror in an obscenity trial stemming from the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's notorious photographs of the sado-masochistic homosexual underground dramatized this point. Acknowledging that he did not like Mapplethorpe's rebarbative photographs, the juror nonetheless concluded that "if people say it's art, then I have to go along with it." An amazing statement, that.

Of course, this intimidation-by-art is not entirely new. Reviewing Salvador Dalí's autobiography in the mid-1940s, George Orwell observed that in many quarters there existed an unspoken assumption that

> the artist is to be exempt from the moral laws that are binding on ordinary people. Just pronounce the magic word "Art," and everything is O.K. Rotting corpses with snails crawling over them are O.K.; kicking little girls in the head is O.K.; even a film like *L'Age d'Or* [which shows among other things detailed shots of a woman defecating] is O.K.

Orwell slightly overstated the case. Not *quite* everything is OK. The outrage must be a certifiable politically correct outrage. Thus when the art dealer Mary Boone recently passed out live ammunition at a gallery opening she was duly charged with unlawful distribution of ammunition and resisting arrest. Guns are naughty. The Brooklyn Museum can exhibit a picture of the Virgin covered with porn and clumps of elephant dung—trashing Roman Catholicism is definitely an OK pursuit—and it's an artist exercising his right to free speech. But just try the same thing with the Star of David or an image sacred to Islam or a portrait of Martin Luther King. Still, by and large Orwell's point holds: "If you threw dead donkeys at people, they threw money back." The disturbing thing, as Mr. de Montebello observed in his op-ed piece, is that so many people are "so cowed by the art establishment or so frightened at being labeled philistines that they dare not speak out and express their dislike for works that they find either repulsive or unaesthetic or both."

It is worth noting that Mr. de Montebello, though praising Mayor Giuliani's "astute critical acumen," did criticize his efforts to withhold funds from the Brooklyn Museum. For myself, I cannot help regarding the mayor's action as a courageous, heartfelt gesture—perhaps the only really "transgressive" gesture in the entire controversy. All the same, the legal squabble it precipitated is unfortunate. More, it betokens an important public failure. For it brings the law to bear on a realm of activity that, in a healthy society, should be adjudicated in the court of taste and manners. To my mind, the controversy over "Sensation" has much less to do with free speech than with some basic questions about the kind of public life we want to encourage. Every freedom—even freedom of speech—carries a corresponding duty. Moral and aesthetic objections cannot always be answered simply by appealing to the First Amendment. In the 1920s, John Fletcher Moulton, a British judge, observed that "there is a widespread tendency to regard the fact that [one] can do a thing as meaning [one] may do it. There can be no more fatal error than this. Between 'can do' and 'may do' ought to exist the whole realm which recognizes the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all the other things that make life beautiful and society possible." One of the most destructive aspects of our culture has been the evisceration of that middle ground of "duty, fairness, sympathy, taste," etc.—everything that Lord Moulton congregated under the memorable category of "obedience to the unenforceable." The controversy over "Sensation" has dramatized this admirably. It would be a pity if its lessons were obscured by another orgy of self-righteous and misdirected rhetoric about the First Amendment.

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The fiasco of "The American Century"

by Hilton Kramer

There are museum exhibitions that divide critical opinion along party lines, so to speak, and there are museum exhibitions that win something close to universal acclaim. But it is rare—in my experience, anyway—for a major museum exhibition that is devoted to a large and familiar subject to meet with a chorus of scorn, condescension, and derision from critics of almost every persuasion. Yet this has been the unhappy fate of the exhibition called "The American Century: Art & Culture 1900–2000" at the Whitney Museum of American Art.[1] Critics who rarely agree about anything, in either art or life, have found much to dislike about "The American Century" and little to admire. Their reasons vary, of course, but not their overall verdict. It is this adverse critical response to "The American Century" that has made this exhibition something of a milestone in the annals of late twentieth-century museology. Which, in a way, is what the organizers of the show set out to achieve with "The American Century," though what they ended up with was clearly not the kind of milestone the Whitney had in mind for this ambitious undertaking.

What went wrong? In exploring this question, which has immense implications for the future of our art museums, it has to be understood that the fiasco we speak of has been an aesthetic and intellectual fiasco. The experience of art, which it is the function of an art museum to protect and enhance, has been traduced, and the intellectual integrity of art history has been irresponsibly sacrificed to the imperatives of sound-bite history and theme-park sociology. An entire century of American art has been retrofitted to conform to the standards and appeals of our 1990s pop-culture media mentality.

In terms of its box-office appeal, it is hardly a surprise, then, that "The American Century" seems to be enjoying a considerable success. A box-office success is, after all, what "The American Century" has been expressly designed to achieve. Thanks in large part to the Intel Corporation of Santa Clara, California, the corporate sponsor of "The American Century," the exhibition has been promoted with one of the most aggressive marketing campaigns ever launched on behalf of a contemporary art museum, and this in itself guaranteed that the show

1 Part I of "The American Century: Art & Culture 1900–2000," organized by Barbara Haskell, was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art from April 23–August 22, 1999. Part II of "The American Century: Art & Culture 1900–2000," organized by Lisa Phillips, opened September 26 and remains on view through January 23, 2000. The accompanying publications, *The American Century: Art & Culture 1900–1950* by Barbara Haskell (408 pages, $60, $40 paper) and *The American Century: Art & Culture 1950–2000* by Lisa Phillips (400 pages, $60), are published jointly by W. W. Norton & Company and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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would be a marketing success. But it is this marketing strategy, which "The American Century" apparently was conceived to serve, that has made the exhibition an intellectual fiasco.

For what Intel's promotional campaign has been marketing for the Whitney, both on and off the Internet, isn't exactly an art exhibition. It is something else, and it is precisely owing to the nature of what could be promoted by Intel—a pseudo-documentary montage of images and phrases drawn from American social and political history—that works of art, some very fine and many very inferior, are condemned to serve an illustrational and instrumentalist function, both on the Internet and in the exhibition itself. What gets illustrated isn't the experience of art but what Intel's own press materials candidly identify as

> major historical events and key themes addressed by artists over the last 100 years. [These] themes include Industry and Technology; Immigration and Diversity; Politics and Social Change; Inspired by Nature; and the Story of American Art.

It's nice, of course, that "artists" and "art" get mentioned in that statement, but they get mentioned only in reference to what are considered the principal subjects of interest in "The American Century." The art itself is clearly of secondary interest; and at times—given the constant distraction of piped-in music, film clips, computer screens, wall texts, myriad collections of books, magazines, newspaper articles, and sundry other period souvenirs of twentieth-century life in America, including bathroom fixtures—the art is not even of secondary interest in the busy installations that have filled the Whitney's galleries.

The crucial role played by Intel in shaping the very conception of "The American Century" is openly acknowledged by Maxwell L. Anderson, who took over as director of the Whitney Museum with the organization of the exhibition already far advanced and its basic character firmly established. In a statement drafted for an Intel press release that was distributed by the Whitney at the opening of "The American Century," Mr. Anderson underscored the fact that "Intel's contribution enabled us to assemble the most ambitious exhibition of twentieth-century American art and culture ever presented. Their unprecedented collaboration has enabled us to make the exhibition's issues, ideas and images available worldwide on the Internet." Alas, "issues, ideas and images" turn out to be what "The American Century" is mainly about. This did indeed afford a shallow, cliché-ridden conception of American "culture" in this century to dominate the exhibition—a culture of headlines, hemlines, and hype—but it left the history of what American art had actually achieved in this century pretty much a shambles. This no doubt made "The American Century" eminently suitable for transmission on the Internet, but it proved to be an intellectual and artistic disaster on the premises of the Whitney Museum itself.

For what does it mean for an art museum to focus on "issues, ideas and images" rather than on the problems and accomplishments of art itself? That this destructive priority in favor of "issues, ideas and images" alerts us to the many ways in which "the Internet and PCs will change the role of the museum in the twenty-first century," as the Intel statement also claimed, is unfortunately likely to be true. Yet that is a shift in priorities that a responsible art museum ought to be actively resisting, if only because a concentration on "issues, ideas and images" at the expense of the experience of art is guaranteed to render the museum itself complicit in encouraging an aesthetically illiterate attitude towards works of art.

Do we really need to be reminded that it is not the function of an art museum to make the world safe for aesthetic illiteracy? After all, we already suffer from a surfeit of that kind of illiteracy in the art world without our museums adding to it. For anyone attempting to acquire even a rudimentary command of painting, say, as a

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medium of non-verbal expression, an excess of words or the intervention of other media can be more of an obstacle than an aid to aesthetic comprehension. A work of art can only be comprehended in its own medium, and connoisseurship can only be acquired through a close acquaintance with and a painstaking comparison of works in the same medium. There is no fast lane in this endeavor. It requires time, patience, and the cultivation of skills that cannot be acquired at second hand. Years ago, when existentialist philosophy was very much in vogue, the American poet Delmore Schwartz quipped that existentialism meant that nobody could take a bath for you. Well, learning to look at art is a lot like that. Nobody can do it for you. Certainly no technology can do it for you. Which is why all this blather about putting art exhibitions on the Internet is so foolish and dishonest. What you can put on the Internet are those "issues, ideas and images" that the discussion of art often generates in a culture like ours, but that experience has little or nothing to do with the experience of art. A work of art can only be comprehended in its own medium, and for museum professionals to believe otherwise renders them unfit to discharge their principal duties.

It certainly rendered the organizers of "The American Century" unfit to give us a proper account of American art in this century. Once the decision was made to tether every work of art in "The American Century" to some sociological "issue" or "idea," this mammoth, two-part exhibition was turned into a show of documentary images, and all hope of tracing the course of American artistic thought and accomplishment in this century was lost. To qualify for admission to such an exhibition, a work of art had to be seen to exemplify a social trend, a political movement, or some culturally chic mindset. Standards of quality had therefore to be forfeited to the imperatives of a social narrative, and objects that more properly belong to what has come to be called material culture—as distinguished from works of art—had to be accorded parity, if not, as is often the case in "The American Century," preferment.

This disastrous agenda of skewed priorities, in which art is subordinated to the drumbeat of a dubious social narrative, was openly acknowledged by Barbara Haskell, the principal curator of the first part of "The American Century," when the show dealing with the first fifty years of the century met with that chorus of critical derision last spring. Interviewed by Joanne Kaufman in *The Wall Street Journal*, Ms. Haskell defended her debased conception of the show by declaring that "Early on, I rejected doing an exhibition about art history, a perfectly reasonable justifiable show but not one that I felt would be able to reach out to people who weren't already converted. To describe the sequence of styles and which artists influenced whom seemed a dry way of approaching the material and not one that would really have the expansiveness I thought the occasion warranted." She praised what she called the "cinematic flow" of the exhibition, which was itself a tacit acknowledgement that this was meant to be a show of images to be glimpsed rather than an exhibition of distinctive works of art meriting close examination.[2]

Ms. Haskell then went on to bring a very bizarre charge against the show's critics, one of them myself. "A lot of criticism," she said, "betrays a fundamental lack of interest in American art and a lack of understanding. It's as if we're still in 1910 and European art is still the symbol of quality. It's a very strange realization that this is a battle that hasn't yet been won." But it was, of course, Ms. Haskell and her colleagues who had so little confidence in the quality of the art they had available for their exhibition that they felt it necessary to package it as an extra-artistic social narrative with a "cinematic flow" guaranteed to preclude close study. There was no question of being back in 1910. What many of the exhibition's fiercest

2 See "The Curator Strikes Back" by Joanne Kaufman, in *The Wall Street Journal* (May 24, 1999).

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critics—myself among them—were complaining about was the 1990s-style media mindset that looks upon "doing an exhibition about art history" as "a dry way of approaching the material," and thus insufficiently glamorous to score the kind of box-office success the Whitney needed to justify Intel's investment, which is said to be the single largest corporate contribution to an exhibition in museum history. What the critics understood and responded to was the fact that the Whitney not only failed to make the strongest possible case for twentieth-century American art, but also sold out to showmanship and a crass commercial interest as well.

It is not only public taste and understanding that are corrupted by a sellout of this magnitude. As Ms. Haskell's stunned but revealing response to her critics vividly indicates, the intellectual integrity of the curatorial vocation is similarly corrupted. For many years now, as public confidence in the Whitney has plummeted, Ms. Haskell has been the only curator on the museum's staff who retained a significant measure of professional respect. There may have been things to criticize in the ambitious monographic exhibitions she devoted to the work of Marsden Hartley, Milton Avery, Charles Demuth, Ralston Crawford, and Joseph Stella, but they were solid shows all the same. They were important contributions to our understanding of what American painting had achieved in this century, and they were mercifully devoid of any twaddle about art being "more than just abstract form and color relationships"—an obvious and contemptible cheapshot at the late Clement Greenberg—and some of the other guff she descended to in her interview in *The Wall Street Journal*. It is because of that track record of significant exhibitions that Ms. Haskell's contribution to "The American Century" has come as such a shock and disappointment, for one cannot help but regard it as a dismal augury for the future—both Ms. Haskell's and the Whitney's.

About the second part of "The American Century," which purports to cover the period from 1950 to the present, no disappointment of this kind would be in order, for its principle curator, Lisa Phillips, has always accorded priority to social narratives of one kind or another in her prior contributions to the Whitney's exhibition program, and it was not to be expected that she would suddenly suffer a born-again conversion to aesthetic discrimination on the present occasion. If you happen to have seen the exhibition called "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–1965," which Ms. Phillips organized at the Whitney in 1995, you will already know what you are in for with "The American Century: Art & Culture 1950–2000." The only significant difference is one of scale. Here it is the entire history of Abstract Expressionist painting since 1950 that is woefully distorted, while Pop Art in general and Andy Warhol in particular are celebrated on a grand scale. Ditto some of the outsize manufactures of Minimalist art, while Color-field painting is confined to a three-person ghetto in an obscure corner—still another attempt to score against Clement Greenberg, I suppose. And so far I have mentioned only some of the better things in the exhibition Ms. Phillips has given us in lieu of a serious account of American art during the last half century.

What is more in Ms. Phillips's line than serious painting—in this or any other period—is a work like Kiki Smith's *Tale* (1992). *Tale* is a sculpture that depicts a naked female figure crouching on all fours while defecating a long, snakelike turd onto the floor of the museum. It is on this excremental note that the social narrative of "The American Century" is concluded. I don't know if this is meant to be a symbol of what American art has come to in this last decade of the twentieth century, but it is undoubtedly a fitting symbol of the fate that has overtaken the Whitney Museum of American Art.

As for the larger significance of "The American Century" fiasco and what it portends for the future of our art museums, there is an alarming parallel to be noted be-

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tween the blatant misuse of works of art in this exhibition in the name of "culture"—not to mention the patent neglect of works of art that, regardless of their quality, could not be fitted into its ideological schemata—and the intellectual horrors that have overtaken the study of literature in the universities in the name of "theory." For both of these developments represent the intellectual debasement of their respective disciplines. In both, moreover, we can discern the same abandonment of artistic standards, the same attempt to supplant the values and conventions of high culture with those of pop culture and the entertainment media, and the same contempt for the traditions which these particular institutions—the art museum and the university—were created to safeguard and advance. And just as the proponents of radical literary theory in the universities have reduced the very concept of "theory" to that of a nihilistic assault on literature itself, so the governing conception of culture in "The American Century" reduces that once useful idea to a mindless catchall in which the highest artistic achievements and the trashiest debris of our civilization are afforded equal attention and respect.

For it is not only because of its misuse of art that "The American Century" has proven to be such an intellectual fiasco. It is also owing to the ways in which it has abused the idea of culture itself that this exhibition and its accompanying publications have inspired so much ridicule and derision. There may be something to criticize or amend in Matthew Arnold's idea of culture as the "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, in all matters that most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world," but documentary extravaganzas culled from the "issues, ideas and images" to be found in media responses to art are not a persuasive alternative, especially when riddled with so much of the worst that has been thought and said about the subject under discussion. The sad fact is, there was no one involved in either the conception or the execution of "The American Century" who was capable of taking hold of the subject at an intellectual level even close to what the subject itself called for. Yet its box-office success with a public even more ignorant about its subject than its organizers may very well establish "The American Century" as a model for other museums to emulate. This is all the more likely if culturally illiterate corporations like Intel continue to exploit such ill-conceived cultural entertainments for the purpose of promoting their own products and services. In this respect, too, "The American Century" may prove to be an ominous augury.

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Jorge Luis Borges & the plural I

by Eric Ormsby

It was ironic of fate, though perhaps predictable, to allow Jorge Luis Borges to develop over a long life into his own Doppelgänger. In a 1922 essay entitled "The Nothingness of Personality," Borges asserted that "the self does not exist." Half-a-century later, an international personality laden with acclaim, he had to depend on wry, self-deprecating quips to safeguard his precious inner nullity. "*Yo no soy yo*" ("I am not I"), wrote Juan Ramón Jiménez; this was a proposition that Borges not only endorsed but also made a fundamental axiom of his oeuvre. In his story "The Zahir," written in the 1940s, he could state, "I am still, albeit only partially, Borges," and in "Limits," a poem from the 1964 collection aptly entitled *The Self and the Other*, he ended with the line (as translated by Alastair Reid), "Space, time, and Borges now are leaving me." By 1980, however, to an interviewer who said, "Everyone sitting in this audience wants to know Jorge Luis Borges," he would reply, "I wish I did. I am sick and tired of him." On the lecture circuit, Borges, playing Sancho Panza to his own Quixote, perfected the sardonic stratagems that would keep his huge prestige at bay. Not fortuitously perhaps, his renown grew as, after 1955, his final blindness deepened: fragile and vaguely Chaplinesque in his rumpled linen suit, he emanated a prophetic aura, a shy Tiresias enamored of the tango.

It had not always been thus. The prim and diffident mama's boy whose idea of a date, well into middle age, was to bring a girl home to sit dumbfounded before his overpowering dowager of a mother while she rehearsed the martial glories of "Georgie's" military forebears; the indolent librarian for whom a day of work at the Miguel Cané Municipal Library meant slipping off into some secluded nook to study works by Léon Bloy, Paul Claudel, or Edward Gibbon (a combustible ménage à trois!); the awkward intellectual so self-conscious that he could appear in public only by hunching down behind the lectern while a friend read his words to the audience—all these tentative and inchoate identities (along with many others) coalesced to fabricate "Borges," that self-shaped golem of audacious erudition who accompanied, and often eclipsed, Borges himself on the triumphal peregrinations of his last three decades.

If the nullification of personal identity exists in his work side by side with a sort of wonder at the profusion of selves even the most ordinary life entails, this must be viewed in the context of Borges's larger obsessions. For he was haunted by infinitude. A horrified fascination with the limitless in space and in time animates all his finest works. The horror arises not because of immeasurable magnitude as such, but because of the fact that the unbounded is infinitely divisible. This is why Borges returns so frequently in essays and fictions to the ancient paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. For Borges, infinity is always serial; it demands

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replication *ad infinitum*. One of his favorite figures for infinitude is the mirror image, that vertiginous repetition of the same mute yet glimmering reflection. Hence, too, his related horror of mirrors: "I have been horrified before all mirrors," he wrote in the poem "The Mirrors": "I look on them as infinite, elemental/ fulfillers of a very ancient pact/ to multiply the world."

In "Averroës' Search" the narrator speaks of the "dread of the grossly infinite," by which he means "mere space, mere matter." The Borgesian infinite, by contrast, is filled, and its images are all ultimately double. Every identity, like the commonplace but magical coin in "The Zahir," possesses its obverse: each side both negates and reaffirms the other.

The library, whether the Library of Babel in his great "fiction" of the same name or the National Library of Argentina where Borges served as director for some eighteen years, is a fitting metaphor for infinitude. The fact that Borges was almost completely blind during his tenure as national librarian must have strengthened his sense of boundlessness. Anyone who has wandered in a large library at night when all the lights are out will appreciate the eerie sensation of limitlessness; the books on serried shelves, each foreshadowing its neighbor, appear to extend into endlessness, and to perceive this purely by touch must be doubly persuasive. In his magnificent "Poem of the Gifts," Borges wrote, "Aimlessly, endlessly, I trace the confines,/ high and profound, of this blind library."

Borges's two predecessors as national librarian had both been blind as well; this weird coincidence led him to identify with the more distinguished of them, Paul Groussac, and to muse on whether their identities were not after all interchangeable. The sharpened sense of recurrence, the fixed conviction that nothing is truly new, the awareness of fate as a player on a field of infinite yet starkly delimited possibilities, give a claustrophobic cast to Borges's most powerful fantasies. Small wonder that one of his favorite lines from Shakespeare is Hamlet's "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams!" And it is this pinched infinitude, if I may so put it, that ultimately makes of Borges, for all his fabled brevity, an epic writer.

How to do justice to the work of this strangely mercurial master whose greatest writings often read as though written (in Borgesian terms) by Everybody and Nobody? How to do justice to them, especially, in English which, though beloved by Borges from childhood, hardly seems suitable for his chaste and cunning prose? Here the French, who have venerated Borges since Drieu La Rochelle "discovered" him in the 1930s, appear to have beaten us to the draw. The impressive Pléiade edition of the complete works began appearing in 1993, and this year, the centenary of Borges's birth, saw publication both of the second and final volume of the works and of the delightful *Album de la Pléiade* devoted to Borges. The *Album* contains much biographical information as well as a profusion of charming photographs. Elegantly translated and annotated, the Pléiade edition, which Borges himself helped plan, is far and away the most complete collection of the works; its twin volumes contain many pieces not yet available in Spanish. The three-volume *Obras completas*, which began to appear in Barcelona in 1989, is far from complete; a series of *textos recobrados,* or "recovered texts," collecting the lost, suppressed, or pseudonymous writings is now in progress, with a plump first volume (covering the decade 1919–1929) published in 1997.

Viking has now mounted a serious challenge to Gallic presumption by bringing out three superb volumes devoted, respectively, to Borges's fictions, poems, and "non-fictions."[1] These are strikingly designed books,

1 *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, (Viking; 565 pages, $40). *Selected Poems*, edited by Alexander Coleman, (Viking; 478 pagers, $40). *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger, (Viking; 558 pages, $40).

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from the deckle-edged pages which invite the finger to riffle them to the embossed labyrinths of the dust jackets (a different labyrinth for each genre) to the photos of Borges on the spines: a young and pensive Borges adorns the poems, the middle-aged author in thick spectacles peers from the non-fictions, and the elderly author, already pleasantly oracular, muses, chin propped on splayed fingers, from the fiction. Lined up in a row, these author photos look less chronological than circular, three images of what Borges called "the plural I."

Borges wrote in the prologue to his 1975 collection of poems, *The Unending Rose*, that "verse should have two obligations: to communicate a precise instance and to touch us physically, as the presence of the sea does." Lovers of Borges's prose, especially of the incomparable stories in *Fictions* (1944) and *The Aleph* (1949), tend to dismiss his poetry; and yet, Borges saw himself, and with justice, first and foremost as a poet. An oddity about Borges, one of several, lies in the fact that his stories are many-layered and densely allusive while his verse by and large is plain and univocal. The demonic Borges penned the prose but in the poetry, Borges—not "Borges" in all his sly, Protean guises, but quotidian, all-too-human Jorge Luis—spoke in his soft but unmistakable individual voice.

Borges was probably too intelligent to become a great poet, most of whom seem to have a certain saving stupidity in abundant supply. He approvingly quotes a line by his compatriot, the often marvelous poet Leopoldo Lugones: "*Iba el silencio andando como un largo lebrel*" ("Silence was moving like a long greyhound"). The simile is slightly comical, and yet, as Borges recognized, the verse has a curious magic that arises not only from its intrinsic music, but also from its very strangeness. Despite the profound strangeness of his own imagination, Borges rarely captured such effects in verse. He usually does "communicate a precise instance," but he almost never manages to "touch us physically."

In the Viking *Selected Poems*, beautifully assembled by Alexander Coleman, we can, however, appreciate Borges's true strengths as a poet. Though he set out to become the "poet of Buenos Aires," Borges mainly succeeded as a poet, it seems to me, in the quite honorable but currently unfashionable tradition exemplified in English by such authors as Kipling, Stevenson, Belloc, and Chesterton; this is the tradition which T. S. Eliot, somewhat sniffily, referred to as "verse" as opposed to "poetry." If one thinks of Borges as a poet in this tradition—as, that is, an English poet who happened to write in Spanish—it is easier to appreciate his poetic achievement. Borges the poet suffers when set beside Lorca (whom he detested as a "professional Andalusian") or Neruda, or such brilliant compatriots as Lugones or Enrique Banchs, not because he necessarily possessed lesser gifts, but because he chose to write within an alien, and sharply circumscribed, tradition.

Borges excelled particularly in such forms as the ballad. The best of these is probably "The Golem." The version in the new edition, by Alan S. Trueblood, captures its playful mood (though not its mystery) rather well:

> That cabbalist who played at being God
> gave his spacey offspring the nickname
> Golem.
> (In a learned passage of his volume,
> these truths have been conveyed to us by
> Scholem.)

In a 1968 recording of Borges reading his poems, he comments that he and his one-time collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares consider this the best poem he has ever "perpetrated," and when he reads "The Golem," one understands why. What Borges was attempting in this and other such poems was not to create radical imagery or startling phrases but rather, with a maximum of craft and self-effacement, to tap into the age-old and immemorial sources of balladry. In Borges's soft yet distinct articulation of the poem, the listener senses his awareness of

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the old Scots Border ballads, of the German ballad tradition, of the medieval Spanish *coplas*. Despite his rather childish glee in the rhyme *Golem/Scholem* (he uses it twice), Borges demonstrates that one side of him—one Borges, as it were—would have liked nothing better than to meld into some primordial and anonymous tradition within which he would be indistinguishable from his fellows. Indeed, in his celebrated "Borges and I," he notes that "good writing belongs to no one in particular, not even to my other, but rather to language and tradition."

The translations are by some thirteen different hands, including such well-known names as Willis Barnstone, Robert Fitzgerald, Alastair Reid, and John Updike; all strike me as excellent and often superb. It is a pity that certain of the earlier translations, such as John Hollander's rendering of "The Golem"—a miracle of translation if there ever was one—could not be included; but when so much has been given, it is churlish to ask for more. I do have a minor quibble: why publish so many of the same prose poems from *The Maker* (*El Hacedor*), Borges's 1960 collection, in both the *Selected Poems* and the *Collected Fictions*, all the more so since the versions in the former, with Spanish text en face, are markedly superior?

No other twentieth-century author drew so many skins about himself as Borges did: he moved in nimble imagination from the mind of a German concentration camp commandant ("*Deutsches Requiem*") to a twelfth-century Muslim philosopher ("Averroës' Search") to the Minotaur itself ("The House of Asterion"), not to mention countless others, from Byzantine theologians to detectives, *caudillos* to *compadritos*, lunatics to librarians. Moreover, Borges's fancy coursed at its pleasure over centuries and found no locale so alien as to be impenetrable: in sentence after magical sentence, Babylon cohabits with Buenos Aires, the pampas with the labyrinth.

Borges's dense, compressed, almost bony prose refuses frills; it would be documentary were it not for the cadenced consciousness that dictated it. The rhythm of Borges's language, even more in the prose than in the poetry, is—I do not know how else to put this—at once arid and incantatory. When he does permit himself a flourish, the effect is intense. In the famous sentence that opens "The Circular Ruins" Borges writes: "*Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche.*" Andrew Hurley in his new translation renders this "No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night." The phrase "unanimous night" startles. In fact, it is only with the final sentence of the story that we understand what is meant by this phrase: "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him." In "A History of Eternity," in the *Selected Non-Fictions*, there is the apposite remark: "This unanimous universe, this apotheosis of assimilation and interchange." In the unanimity of night we are all figments of dream; we dream others who dream us in turn.

By such secretive strokes, with immense concision, Borges raised his best prose to a level his poems rarely, if ever, reach. His fictions therefore require of a translator the care and the subtlety of ear which ought to be brought to the translation of poetry. Andrew Hurley is painstaking, and there is at times a blunt literalness about his versions; this makes his translations an extremely helpful guide to the originals. By any standard his accomplishment here is immense; for the first time all of Borges's fictions are together in English in a single volume, and all have been translated in a consistent voice by a single hand. The problems with Hurley's translation arise not because he is a poor translator but rather because he appears not to have a good sense of English prose style, or to command such a style himself. Earlier translators of the fictions—I think especially of Anthony Kerrigan and Anthony Bonner—were not always as accurate as Hurley; still, when you read their versions, you knew at once that you were in the presence of a bizarre and incomparable author. With Hurley you must

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work harder to recover and maintain this sense.

Consider the complete sentence with which "The Circular Ruins" opens:

> Nadie lo vio desembarcar en la unánime noche, nadie vio la canoa de bambú sumiéndose en el fango sagrado, pero a los pocos días nadie ignoraba que el hombre taciturno venía del Sur y que su patria era una de las infinitas aldeas que están aguas arriba, en el flanco violenta de la montaña, donde el idioma zend no está contaminada de griego y donde es enfrecuente la lepra.

Hurley translates this to read:

> No one saw him slip from the boat in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe as it sank into the sacred mud, and yet within days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man had come there from the South, and that his homeland was one of those infinite villages that lie upriver, on the violent flank of the mountain, where the language of the Zend is uncontaminated by Greek and where leprosy is uncommon.

This is certainly accurate. But why does Hurley use "slip from the boat" instead of "disembark"? Why does he render the participial *sumiéndose* with three words "as it sank"? Hurley does try to preserve the em and en sounds that Borges used to lace his sentence tight (and which he echoed in the final line of the story; it is about *circular* ruins after all), but the effect falters because the sentence as translated has lost its tautness; the repetitions of *nadie* (no one), which sound like the successive voices in a round, pull us down and inward, as though into the spirals of a maze. Then, at the word "South," the movement of the prose changes, and the translation should reflect this; we are suddenly drawn outward toward those "infinite villages." For comparison, here is the older version by Anthony Bonner:

> No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sink into the sacred mud, but in a few days there was no one who did not know that the taciturn man came from the South and that his home had been one of those numberless villages upstream in the deeply cleft side of the mountain, where the Zend language has not been contaminated by Greek and where leprosy is infrequent.

Bonner has preserved the momentum and economy of the original. True, he has not been as exact ("deeply cleft side of the mountain" instead of "the violent flank"), but he has transposed something of the feel of the Spanish without committing violence to its sense. Hurley is right: the villages are "infinite," but Bonner's use of "numberless" keeps the meaning while recreating the aural pattern of the original.

Hurley's translation is weakest where he must render dialogue. Perhaps the worst examples occur in the early story "Man on Pink Corner" (not a very good story, if the truth be told). The reader winces at such lines as "the first row of fellows—pure Eyetalians, an' all eyes—opened out like a fan, and fast. But that wa'n't about to last," and has become almost insensate by the time he reaches "There are people out there—I figure they're just talkers, you know—saying there's some guy down here in these boondocks that fancies himself a knife fighter, and a bad 'un—say he's called the Sticker. I'd like to make his acquaintance, so he could show me—me being nobody, you understand—what it means to be a man of courage." *In these boondocks*? Such passages read as if scripted by Salvador Dalí for "The Lone Ranger."

There is another problem with Hurley's translation. Since he seems to approach the texts as purely linguistic or literary puzzles, he scants certain dimensions of Borges's vision. To translate Borges well, one needs not simply to know Spanish but to appreciate if not command his entire vast range of cultural reference. Perhaps only Borges's own Pierre Menard might accomplish this; even so, it is part of a trans-

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lator's responsibility to elucidate, rather than obscure, those points on which his original texts depend for their effects.

To be specific, in certain of Hurley's notes, but especially those that deal with matters Islamic, he shows himself quite unequal to his task. Borges himself sometimes makes small errors when dealing with Arabic or Persian names; these errors of transliteration reflect the fact that Spanish Orientalists by and large cling to an idiosyncratic scheme of transliteration not used elsewhere. But in dealing with the wider world of Islam, which he entered in imaginative disguise as boldly as once Burton, disguised as a pilgrim, entered Mecca, Borges was strikingly accurate and unusually well informed. No one expects Hurley to translate or interpret Arabic or Persian names and titles with any expertise but he should not interpolate errors into texts where they were previously lacking.

Most egregious are the tinkerings Hurley has performed on the text of "Averroës' Search," one of Borges's noblest fictions. Borges has Averroës—whom he also, correctly, calls Ibn Rushd—allude to Ibn Sīda, an illustrious eleventh-century Arab philologist of Muslim Spain, who happened to be blind. Hurley transforms Ibn Sīda into "ibn-Sina" and garbles the former's main work, known in Arabic as *Al-Muḥkam* (i.e., the "firmly established" [book]) into the impossible form *Moqqam*, even though Borges had it right to begin with! Hurley has not heard of Ibn Sīda and so makes the facile assumption that Borges meant to write Ibn Sīnā. But the real Ibn Sīnā, or Avicenna, died at the other end of the Islamic world some thirty years before Ibn Sīda. Ibn Sīnā was many things, a great physician and philosopher as well as a bon vivant (he brought on his own death through excessive fornication), but he was not blind. It is obvious that Borges, for personal as well as literary reasons, wanted to allude not to a randy metaphysician from Persia but to a blind Andalusian philologist, that is, someone from Borges's (and Averroës's) world of reference who cannot see the words that are his stock in trade but who must rely on imagination, just as Borges must rely on imagination to "see" Averroës. In any case, should a translator meddle with an author's text in this fashion?

Again, in his notes to the same story, Hurley blunders when he says about the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, "This is a very peculiar story to put in the minds of these Islamic luminaries, for the story of the seven sleepers of Ephesus is a Christian story." As it happens, and as Borges well knew, this legend has long been part of the Islamic tradition; in fact, the eighteenth *sūrah* of the Qur'ān devotes several verses to those whom Muslims know as "the people of the cave" ("*ahl al-kahf*" in Arabic).

The languages and culture of Islam were crucial to Borges's imagination, and a translator must appreciate this. Indeed, there is no other contemporary author who has so assimilated Islamic traditions and motifs, and treated them with such loving familiarity, as Borges. Polyglot from childhood, fluent in English, French, German and, of course, Spanish, and having taught himself Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse in middle age, Borges finally embarked on the study of classical Arabic with an Egyptian tutor whom he met in Geneva in the last year of his life. He was then eighty-six. And though his ambition in studying Arabic was to be able to read *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah*, or *The Thousand and One Nights*, in the original, Borges had had a lifelong interest in, and considerable knowledge of, Arabic and Persian literature. Such a fascination, of course, is not so strange for an author in the Spanish tradition. Linguists estimate that there are still some four thousand words of Arabic origin in contemporary Spanish, and Spain has had a long line of outstanding (if eccentric) Arabists, including Miguel Asín-Palacios and Emilio García-Gómez, whose studies and translations of Andalusian Arabic literature Borges had read.

A curious token of Borges's fascination with Arabic literature appears in the *Album de la Pléiade*. This is a humble check from

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La Rosa Blanca, a Lebanese restaurant in Buenos Aires, where Borges dined one evening with friends. On the left-hand margin of the check, like the spidery gloss of a medieval commentator, runs a famous verse by the great tenth-century Arabic poet Abū Tayyib al-Mutanabbī, which Borges has scrawled in a literal Spanish translation. In English the verse reads: "The horsemen and the night and the desert know me,/ and the sword and the lance, the paper and the pen." In a caption that can only be described as Borgesian, the editor of the *Album* has misidentified the Arabic writing on the check as Borges's own rendering of lines by "an imaginary Arab poet." In fact, the Arabic on the Rosa Blanca bill is nothing more mysterious or imaginary than the dinner of Borges and his friends—*kibbeh*, *kofteh*, and *meshwi*, among other Lebanese delicacies.

Borges cites al-Mutanabbī's verse elsewhere; it was of obvious importance to him. The synecdoches of the verse encompass the twin realms of contemplation and action, at which, the poet boasts, he is equally adept. Unlikely as it might seem at first glance, the shy, clumsy librarian with the bad eyes was torn by the same dichotomies. Borges's fascination for the tango and milonga; his pleasure in the brawls and vendettas of violent districts of Buenos Aires; his knowing pronouncements on *lunfardo* (the Buenos Aires patois savored by literati); his immersion in gaucho tales and the life of the pampas, together with his unreserved admiration for Domingo Sarmiento's great nineteenth-century classic *Facundo*; his unseemly delight in knife fighting (has any author ever described throat-slitting with as much gusto as Borges?); not to mention his courageous public opposition to Perón—these and other tendencies reveal an intense fascination with a life of action, and quite often violent action. True, his tales of war and cruelty betray a bookish streak; but then, even his most bookish tales are riven with covert violence. In the Arab poet's verse, the sword and the lance hold equal honor with the paper and the pen, and this equipoise could not but have appealed to Borges.

If I were to list all the subjects that attracted Jorge Luis Borges the feuilletonist and journalist over the course of his long career, I would have to compile an inventory rivalling the author's own catalogues—those outlandish tallies of the most disparate objects by which he was wont to evoke his sequential infinitudes. Referring solely to the new *Selected Non-Fictions*, in many respects the most interesting of the Viking volumes, I would have to enumerate, for example, essays on the duration of hell, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the detective story, Ramon Llull, Germany and World War II, Kabbalah, Achilles and the tortoise, the "art of verbal abuse," *The Thousand and One Nights*, a history of angels, film criticism of *King Kong*, *The Informer*, *The Petrified Forest* (and other films), notices on Orson Welles (and *Citizen Kane*), T. S. Eliot, S. S. Van Dine, Isaac Babel, and Theodore Dreiser, book reviews of Faulkner, Aldous Huxley, H. G. Wells, and (not really surprisingly, given his love of the detective story) Ellery Queen, profound studies of Dante ("Nine Dantesque Essays"), Kafka ("Kafka and his Precursors") and Edward FitzGerald, not to mention a history of the tango and a series of transcribed lectures composed after he became too blind to read his own notes. Even this list is skeletal, as the thousands of pages of the Barcelona and Pléiade editions attest; the bulk of Borges's output was belletristic.

Much of this work is inevitably dated. What Borges finds to write about, say, *King Kong* is less interesting than the fact that he had anything to say at all: "A monkey [sic] forty feet tall . . . may have obvious charms, but those charms have not convinced this viewer. King Kong is no full-blooded ape but rather a rusty, desiccated machine." So, too, it is good to know what Borges had to say, in 1925, about *Ulysses* and, in 1939, about *Finnegans Wake*; and yet, one turns to these, as to the film and book reviews, more as historical curiosities than as critical essays in their own right.

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Much of the volume is of this nature, and, after some acquaintance with the contents, one longs for the essays that have had to be left out—the magisterial pages on Quevedo, for example, or Borges's blistering attack on Americo Castro. (Where too is "An Autobiographical Essay," also omitted from the Pléiade volumes, which Borges put together in 1970 with the ill-fated Norman Thomas di Giovanni? A casualty, I suspect, of Borges's implacable widow, Maria Kodama, who guards his literary legacy more zealously than Fafnir his hoard.) To quibble further: with one exception the volume ignores all Borges's voluminous writings on Argentine literature specifically, and Spanish literature generally, and that exception, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," is, sad to say, quite cursory; it would have been useful, for example, to have had the entire early collection of essays, which Borges entitled *Inquisiciones* and then suppressed, available in English (a Spanish edition appeared after Borges's death in 1986).

But these are minor cavils, for what remains is generally splendid. The nine essays on Dante constitute close readings unlike anything else that I have seen on the *Commedia*, for Borges was a virtuoso reader, as well as a writer of genius. A meticulous analysis of a single phrase or verse, supported by scholarship in Italian, French, German, and Spanish, leads him to connections that seem preposterous and yet are plausible; he thus brings Dante into conjunction with the Persian poet and mystic Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār ("The Simurgh and the Eagle") or explores the links between Dante and the Venerable Bede ("Dante and the Anglo-Saxon Visionaries") and does so with meticulous erudition combined with imaginative boldness—a rare combination at any time.

The *Selected Non-Fictions*, lucidly translated by Eliot Weinberger with Esther Allen and Suzanne Jill Levine, gives us Borges at his most various. The editor has ordered the essays chronologically; it is thus possible to get some sense of Borges's development. The best essays, such as "A History of Eternity," share with the best of the fictions an unmistakable intensification of language; the sentences seem so replete with thought and feeling in equal measure that they brim to the very edge of utterance.

There was after all something of the *exemplum*, if not exactly the saint, in Borges. In unexpected moments on a college stage or on some talk show, the Borgesian oracle would fall silent, and a personage of sly, calm, mischievous, and yet gentle demeanor would peer forth from his sightless eyes. Anecdotes abound; I give only one example from the large (and growing) literature. On his first visit to the desert in North Africa, Borges is seen sifting sand grains through his fingers and, when asked what he is doing, replies, "I am rearranging the Sahara." Such tales, whimsical, a bit sardonic, cryptic even, resemble the tales of the ancient philosophers as much as the tales of the Hasidim (a sect Borges identified with). Except for Kafka, no other modern writer has become as emblematic of himself and his own curious world as Borges has.

How extraordinary that so many-selved, so ultimately vaporous, a personage as Borges, or "Borges," should come to play this role. What other modern author was routinely quizzed for his views on time and memory, the enigma of personality, the possibility of an afterlife and personal immortality, among other ponderous topics, as was Borges? He cheerfully declared that he held no belief in an afterlife and that he personally welcomed the inevitable oblivion that would engulf his own name, as if extinction alone offered an escape from the claustrophobia of infinitude. "No one is someone," he wrote in "The Immortal," "a single immortal man is all men. Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, hero, philosopher, demon, and world—which is a long-winded way of saying that *I am not*." Dignified despite his dishevelment, his crumpled fedora in one hand, his inquisitive white cane in the other, Señor Borges, our improbable psychopomp, shows us the way into unanimous night.

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Iris Murdoch: a memoir

by Jeffrey Meyers

I have always admired the qualities that made Iris Murdoch a great novelist: her technical skill, richness of imagination, philosophical ideas, and moral vision. In March 1978 I met Iris and her husband, John Bayley, Warton Professor of English at Oxford, when they were invited to teach at the University of Denver. They each gave a public lecture—Iris on "Art Imitates Nature," John on "Hardy's Poetry"—and jointly led a two-week seminar on "Truth and Falsehood in Fiction." When my wife and I drove in to attend the seminar from the University of Colorado at Boulder, where we were both teaching, we were surprised to find only three other participants. We wondered if the locals were too intimidated to attend a class taught by what journalists had called "the most intelligent couple in the world."

The dimly-lit seminar room gave me my first glimpse of them. John, like Professor Calculus in the Tintin books, was short and bald, with little wings of hair on the sides of his head. He had untied shoelaces and mismatched socks, a stained woolly tie, and fly at half-mast. Soft-voiced and benign, he managed to steer his dazzling talk through an alarming, even spectacular, stutter. Photographs of Iris in her twenties reveal that she'd been a great beauty, and in her youth many Oxford men had fallen in love with her. Though bulky now at sixty, she was still attractive. She had a charming expression, serene yet alert and curious, with short, roughly-cut hair, bright, clear-seeing eyes and (as I later discovered when I kissed her cheek) soft, rosy skin. Her dress was donnish and distinctly non-fashionable: full skirts and shapeless smocks, dark stockings and sensible shoes. Like the title of one of her novels, she seemed both nice and good.

The seminar focused on the form of the novel, especially in Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. But their talk ranged freely over all sorts of novels and they responded easily to any topic the students raised. The intimate class allowed me to observe their brilliant, provocative, even mesmerizing teaching, both when engaged with each other in an intellectual duet and when they questioned and stimulated us to keep up with them. As in the best kind of tutorial, they brought the students up to the level of the teacher by sharing their ideas and creating a collaborative atmosphere. Humane and highly civilized, both combined penetrating—yet entertaining—knowledge of the structure, characters, and ideas of the novels with down-to-earth and humanely engaging analysis of the meaning. Ever-present in the discussion was the deeper structure of the novels, the presence of the author's mind and spirit. In contrast to the linguistic critics that have largely replaced this type of moral teaching, Iris and John recreated and enhanced the experience of reading and invited the students to share their responses.

The Rocky Mountain spring was as capricious as ever, and slush and ice lined the

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streets. As guests of the university, Iris and John had been cloistered in Denver and were eager to break out of Brown's Hotel and see a bit more of Colorado. They agreed to come and spend some time with us in Boulder. I took them on a campus tour. In our wool jackets and scarves, we gazed down at the students, bronzed already, sunning themselves in bathing suits on the pool patio. I pointed out some of the stranger sights of the university: the office of the Gay-Lesbian caucus (then a rarity for a college campus), the robotic lap-swimmers in the Olympic-sized pool, the grunting brutes in the weightlifting room, the surrealistic ice rink, and the Alferd Packer Grill, ghoulishly named for a convicted cannibal. At lunch I introduced Iris to the bagel.

Warm-hearted and sympathetic, Iris was ready to discuss any subject, and had the novelist's curiosity about new people and places. At a small party we held, she made sure to talk to everyone, tried to draw each person out, and listened attentively to what they had to say. That day our talk ranged over a number of topics, and we discussed both her novels and her life. Among contemporary writers she admired Saul Bellow and Philip Larkin. When I asked her why she had so many homosexual characters in her novels, she said she knew so many of them at Oxford. She did not use foreign settings because she had not lived abroad long enough to feel she'd thoroughly understood an alien locale. Her only extended residence in a foreign country was when she had worked with refugees in Austria after the war. I had noted that she was keenly interested in paintings and liked to bring them into her fiction, and we talked about the German expressionist Max Beckmann, whom she'd used in *Henry and Cato*. In the novel the hero plans to write a book about the painter. Her interest in Beckmann continued, and in July 1985 she wrote in a letter to me: "What a great painter—I love him —we saw a lot of his work in [the] St. Louis Art Museum, and saw a good deal of private stuff too, property of one Buster May. (He is dead now alas—I hope he left the paintings to the Art Museum.) Just lately we came across 6 wonderful Beckmanns in the Museum in Cologne."

I asked about her attitude to reviews, and she said they weren't sent to her and she rarely read them. She felt that they were usually hasty and superficial, that often reviewers and critics did not understand what her works were really about. We also talked about Boulder and college life in general. She disapproved of the current sexual morality of students and felt it would be better if there were less promiscuity. Abortion centers made men more careless and placed more responsibility for pregnancy on women.

After that first meeting, Iris and I exchanged letters over the next eighteen years. We met in London and Oxford, and in 1988 I interviewed her for the *Paris Review*. During these years, she published a dozen books of philosophy, fiction, poetry, and drama; lectured around the world; won the Booker Prize; and became Dame Iris. She was a faithful correspondent whose letters, sprinkled with exclamation marks and written in an extraordinarily difficult hand, I slowly deciphered. (She decorated one particularly jolly letter with a wavy aquamarine border and five red stars.) But she had to be stimulated with questions that interested and provoked her—especially printed comments about her behavior and private life—or she would simply, when pressed for time, dash off a quick note. (I never got her to explain, for example, why many philosophers thought Herbert Spencer was important.)

Our correspondence continued the Denver seminar indefinitely, ranging from classic authors—Lady Murasaki to John Cowper Powys (a great favorite and, I suspect, a strong influence on her work)—to prominent academics and friends like Lord Glenavy, the philosopher A. J. Ayer, and the United Nations official Brian Urquhart. I often asked her what she thought of contemporary writers. Iris recalled that in 1954 she and John had met Edmund Wilson "in

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Oxford I *think* chez Isaiah Berlin, in a dark room. He was rather tough & forbidding and he frightened me. I think Mary McCarthy was with him, or perhaps I dreamed that"—which she certainly did, as Wilson and McCarthy were divorced in 1946. I had wondered why Wilson had pronounced both Iris and John "boring." They were evidently too intimidated by his fierce reputation and forbidding demeanor to contribute much to the conversation.

I especially wanted to know what Iris thought of T. E. Lawrence, D. H. Lawrence, and Joseph Conrad, writers important to me. Alluding perhaps to T. E.'s association with British imperialism in the Middle East or to his habit of backing into the limelight, she wrote in 1990, two years after his centenary: "I *love* T. E. Lawrence, who seems to be *hated* by many people here [in England]. (I also *detest* D. H. Lawrence, the chap not the books, who seems to be *worshipped* by many people here!") I also asked if she knew of a woman doctor in Oxford who had been D. H. Lawrence's pupil as a child. "How awful to be tutored by D. H. Lawrence!" she exclaimed, disapproving of his didactic, mystical, and misogynistic streak. In my next letter I countered this by arguing that D. H. was a brilliantly innovative and successful teacher, both in schools and private tutorials. Responsive to argument and willing to be challenged, Iris replied with engaging humility: "Yes, I daresay Lawrence was an inspiring teacher. I spoke out of prejudice! (I don't altogether like the personality of the author . . . A genius of course & a lovely writer.)"

In another illuminating passage she contrasted Lawrence with Conrad: "DHL is a great writer but I don't (I confess) altogether like him. I like *Kangaroo* best, and some of the stories and poems. But I cannot love him and don't like his attitudes. I find Conrad a more congenial and possibly greater writer. I think *Lord Jim* is [a] wonderful novel. I read it again lately and was very deeply moved by it—including the latter part which some say is less good." In conversation, she rejected John's idea that Lord Jim was really a Pole and therefore rather unconvincing as an adventurous Englishman.

I once asked how Plato's belief (quoted by Iris in *The Fire and the Sun*) that a good book must be produced by a good character related to modern writers who often had bad characters yet wrote good books. Didn't Malcom Lowry use his own bad character to give considerable power to *Under the Volcano*? She agreed, but argued that Lawrence's faults of character led to faults in his books. She did not agree that Kafka had a bad (that is, a weak) character, but said —despite his self-condemnations—that his strong, noble character accounted for the greatness of his books.

Like many successful and respected writers, Iris was sometimes torn by the need for privacy and quiet in which to write and the natural desire to see people and travel the world. In the years I knew her she was frequently invited to attend conferences and lecture abroad. Though these meetings interfered with her work, she accepted most offers, enjoying her role as famous novelist and, at the same time, observing "human folly." Pondering her frenetic activity, she asked: "Why does one do it (go away)? Staying home and working quietly is much jollier." But staying home meant subjecting herself and her work to scrutiny. There were scores of books and articles about her, many, she felt, written by well-intentioned people. But she thought most criticism of her work was absurd. She especially mocked a computer study that had counted the number of times the word "virgin" appeared in her novels. Ignoring it as much as possible, she confessed: "I can't read books about myself."

Inevitably she also became victimized by the type of article that pays homage to the great writer and pretends to intimate knowledge of the subject, while including as much disparaging gossip or scandalous trivia as it can find. Annoyed by a condescending and satiric piece by James Atlas,

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published in March 1988, I offered to send it to her. Atlas had quoted Sir Maurice Bowra, a well-known homosexual, saying—maliciously and quite absurdly—of Iris and John: "Lovely couple. I've slept with both of them." She replied with some irritation and a little sorrow, though her habit of ignoring critics was unshaken: "I have not seen the *Vanity Fair* article (and don't want to). Too bad we sound so drunk & decrepit. What a fascinating remark by Bowra!" Iris dismissed what she ironically called his "charming witticism" and insisted it was "untrue of course."

Iris was irritated once again when the tabloid *Daily Mail* published a sensational but revealing "interview" with her on June 5, 1988. It described her love affair with the handsome war hero Frank Thompson, an Oxford graduate who was captured and executed behind enemy lines in Nazi-occupied Bulgaria. It appeared with a photograph of Iris and the Czech refugee-anthropologist Franz Steiner, who—with Eduard Fraenkel, Arnaldo Momigliano, and Elias Canetti—was one of her older European gurus. "I gave no interview to the *Daily Mail*," she wrote. "The first I heard of their article was when somebody said they'd seen it, and I got hold of a copy. The *Mail* never communicated with me or sent me a copy of the piece. Such are the ways of journalists. . . . About Frank, there is a lot of general knowledge. I can't imagine where the picture of me with Franz came from!"

I once asked Iris about a passage in Victoria Glendinning's life of Rebecca West that stated: "West believed that Iris Murdoch's *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* was based on herself." Iris replied with considerable heat:

> I *invent* people and stories, and regard with horror the idea of exhibiting the adventures or misfortunes of real people in my fiction. To have done this to Rebecca West would have been a disgraceful and unkind act, of which I think anyone who knows me would know me to be incapable. Could you please tell me whether Glendinning's book implies that I *did* base the novel on RW's situation?
>
> I had of course no notion that RW entertained this curious belief, and was puzzled by her coldness, even rudeness, to me at one or two parties. I was scarcely even acquainted with her, had never had a conversation with her, and this as it seemed gratuitous attitude surprised me. Then one day I got a letter from her asking whether what she believed was the case, and saying that from what she had heard about me & her impression of me she had begun to doubt whether I had done this unkind thing, I wrote back saying of course I was not portraying her family life of which I knew nothing and hoped she would acquit me of any such rotten act. She sent a very warm and friendly reply saying she believed me and was sorry to have entertained such suspicions of me! . . . It was [a] perfectly shocking thing to be accused of.

On another hot issue, the admission of men to women's colleges, she sided with the Somerville students and opposed the current trend for co-education. She believed that co-education at Oxbridge was bad for women's colleges. The best female candidates were attracted to the glamor of men's colleges and applied there instead, while few men wanted to attend the women's colleges. She wrote:

> Somerville, my old college, [is] now in a state of turmoil because at last the governing body have decided to admit MEN! A great storm is raging. The undergraduates (junior common room) are, almost to a woman, *absolutely opposed*, and the college is decked with big red posters and banners saying NO! I am on their side. I enjoyed Somerville & St. Anne's life without botheration by males, one could easily meet them anyway, the creatures were all over the place. I fear however that economic reasoning and the will of history will prevail!

Her passionate support of women's rights—though not feminism and feminist criticism which she considered "an insult to women"—led to her criticism of the "bene-

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fits" of Islam: "That religion has, as well as its disregard for human life, another great advantage as it is the only creed which absolutely and fundamentally denies rights, even existence as human persons, to women! This must make it popular with the holders of power in innumerable countries!" She felt, however, a strong sympathy for India, rooted in her childhood reading and schoolgirl friendship at Badminton: "I have always felt connected with India and *love* being there (have only been twice). It's all connected with having read *Kim* when I was about 8. (And many times since.) And I was at school (progressive left wing boarding school) in England with Indira Gandhi, with whom I remain friends."

Though Iris had spent her life in England, she was born in Dublin and could trace her Protestant ancestry back to the seventeenth century. She said she felt "completely Irish" and agonized over the sectarian violence on that unhappy island. In March 1993 she exclaimed:

> About [President] Clinton . . . sending an envoy to Ulster to solve the Irish question! Our idiotic Prime Minister [John Major] seems to have allowed this to take place. The aim apparently is to study problems of "abuse of human rights." This is certainly surprising, as between two sovereign states! A visit to Dublin mentioning (not I think mentioned) the IRA, might be more useful. . . . Our politicians are in total confusion, even chaos! Poor old Europe, poor old Russia, poor old Britain, poor old Ireland.

She moved easily from contemporary politics to theological questions and also wrote: "I forgot to answer your important question. God created the world out of an uncontainable overflow of love. *Ebullitio* [boiling up] is the word used by Eckhart."

Over the years we met from time to time in London and Oxford. On the first of these occasions, in December 1979, she and John came to lunch in Belsize Park in north London. I was teaching at the University of Kent that year but my wife and I were living in a house that I'd rented for the Christmas holidays. As usual they arrived by tube rather than taxi. I walked round the corner to meet them at the station.

Iris discoursed that afternoon on modern writers and academics. She had been reading Thomas Mann and greatly admired his major works, despite his obvious faults: encyclopedic material that was not well integrated into his novels and pedantic dialogues that went on too long.

John Carey, recently made Professor of English at Oxford, she described as lively and hard-working (always a virtue with Iris), though somewhat rebarbative and known as Frosty John. She admired Frank Kermode's learning, but thought him a bit dour, like the Scots. When I said he came from the Isle of Man, she added that that was even worse, for their ancestors were "all elves or something."

She asked about the centers of structuralism in America. I mentioned Yale, Hopkins, and Virginia, which published *New Literary History*, and we spoke of luxurious academic conferences held at the Rockefeller Study Center on Lake Como. She strongly believed (as I did) that structuralism and semiotics were harmful to both literature and literary criticism. She felt there was a big hole in the center of the structuralists' thinking: that the Marxists did not feel obliged to use the same logical thought and clear language as bourgeois liberals.

Our next meeting took place in the summer of 1982. My wife, nine-year-old daughter, and I went to lunch with Iris and John at their house in Steeple Aston, near Oxford, where they had lived since their marriage in 1956. We arrived in a heavy rainstorm, making our way through the wildly overgrown—"we care for it ourselves"—front garden. The house was rundown and seemed oppressively damp and uncomfortable: furniture rickety, slipcovers stained, fire grate full of ashes, and books and papers heaped on the staircase and floor. The walls had huge patches of green mold. The cold

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toilet, with its archaic thunderbox, was filled with language books and dictionaries, including Dutch and Esperanto. (In *Who's Who*, Iris listed as her recreation "learning languages.") Iris and John did not go in for creature comforts, but lived in a kind of austere chaos. The car they drove, an old Renault, was as shabby and as much loved as the house. They kept bringing the car in for repair so they could hang on to it, and had had to install a metal plate in the front so their feet wouldn't fall through the floor. She laughed when I compared it to the paddle boats on the pond of the Boston Common.

It turned out to be a large party, and the other guests, an assortment of eccentric intellectuals who mumbled unfinished sentences, suggested that Iris was paying off her social debts in one gathering. They included Norah Smallwood, Iris's editor at Chatto; Gina, a young newswriter at the BBC whose father taught American literature at Hull; Peta Ady, a moustachioed female economics don at St. Anne's; Iain McGilchrist, John's pet student—bright, affected, and precious, in pale linen suit and mauve socks—just completing a fellowship at All Souls and about to start a medical degree at Southampton; David Luke, an arrogant, bored and decrepit German don at Christ Church; and Professor Chung, a rapacious Korean, who monopolized Iris. Chung obviously thought he had reached the promised land, pulling books off the shelves and insisting—despite her embarrassed reluctance—that she sign and give them to him. I thought she could hold her own or would resent it if I tried to intervene, but I was sorry to see this greedy character take advantage of her kindness.

Looking like a convivial chemist, John concocted a potent brew of champagne cocktail—with bitters, Spanish brandy, and French cognac—that threatened to explode. Iris spent most of her time fending off the Korean and serving the plentiful food. We had cold chicken and tongue, risotto, salad and cheese, baked beans and olives, and hard-boiled eggs with curry sauce. Iris said less than usual, but did mention that she was soon going to visit Stephen Spender in Provence. Though she planned to write there, she would not stay long because of the press of work. Leading us through the wet fronds of her front garden, Iris seemed eager to clean up the gigantic mess (she had refused our help) and get back to her desk.

In October 1983—when I was back in Belsize Park, spending a grant year in London and writing a life of Hemingway—Iris came to dinner. Iris, my wife, and I drank three bottles of wine, but the food was abundant and no one got drunk. We talked about her family background. Her father's people, she said, were lowland Scots farmers. Her mother's family, the Richardsons (she was pleased to discover her connection to the Australian woman novelist Henry Handel Richardson) were squires, given land in Ireland after Cromwell's victories. Her parents had left Ireland in 1920, a year after she was born, but the rest of her family was still there. Her father died in about 1963. She was devoted to her mother, then in her eighties, who suffered from Parkinson's disease and senile dementia. Iris came to London once a week to care for her mother, as well as for John's, and they rather dreaded Christmas with the two sick old mums. Just that day she had moved her mother out of a grim mental asylum and into a nursing home. But she feared that her mother, though much better off, would not be happy there or willing to remain.

We talked of geniuses she had known or met. She observed that Bertrand Russell pretended to be a sage and moral guide, but actually behaved immorally and was "rather a cad." Wittgenstein, whom she knew slightly, had a strong, strange accent. But she did not take much notice of it because she was so busy concentrating on his conversation. He was a genius, impatient with small talk. Disturbed by his own homosexuality, he was also a devil who deliberately caused evil. He abandoned old friends, harshly criticized Jewish refugee-philosophers, told promising students to give up philosophy, and ruined many careers. She

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thought Elizabeth Dipple's recently published study of her work was competent, but Dipple didn't properly understand Wittgenstein and was quite mistaken in arguing that he provided the philosophical basis of her work.

Apart from Wittgenstein, the only other genius Iris had known was Elias Canetti. He was a good man who could have used his intellectual power, had he wished, for evil purposes. She knew and was impressed by John Searle, professor of philosophy at Berkeley, who had advanced J. L. Austin's ideas, but did not agree with his philosophical position. She did not have a television and was interested to hear about *Voices*, a program in which Searle had debated the mind-brain problem with Sir John Eccles. She thought she'd like to appear in that highbrow program.

Iris reflected that she'd been a writer since the age of nine and had always known it would be her vocation. Her first two books, given to her by her father, were *Kim* and *Treasure Island*. She still admired both of them. She read and reread classic novels, especially Tolstoy, Turgenev and Dostoyevsky, Jane Austen and Dickens, Proust and Mann. She'd been through their novels so often that she knew entire passages by heart and sometimes felt anxious that she'd "read all the books." She smiled knowingly when I quoted Mallarmé's "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres."

Iris worked all day, but not at night. She started a new novel as soon as she finished the old one. She was also engaged on a long philosophical work (eventually published as *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* in 1992), based on her Gifford lectures at Edinburgh, which she thought would take a long time to complete. She had no real models for her fictional characters, she said rather disingenuously, and warned that it would be pointless to try to trace their real-life models. They were all based on herself, "which I suppose is rather boring."

She wrote in longhand, making three complete drafts, the final one clear and typed by a professional. She sent in her novels to Chatto & Windus who published them as written. I amused her by quoting Disraeli's "When I want to read a book, I write one," and by comparing her to Bulwer-Lytton, who sent his novels directly to the printer and allowed the publisher to read them only *after* they were bound.

When I contrasted my intellectual isolation at the University of Colorado (where young people came to retire) with the life I led in London, she was surprised. She said she'd always thought of American towns as close to each other, because she simply got on a plane and flew on to the next place. Having spent her life in Oxford and London, it was hard for her to grasp the sense of remoteness one can experience in the American West.

In March 1984, my wife and I had dinner with Iris and John at their London flat in Cornwall Gardens, off the Gloucester Road. She had phoned to invite us on a Saturday morning. I was reading in bed, assumed the call was for my daughter, and let it ring. After about twelve rings a guest finally got out of bed and picked up the receiver. "I sensed you were at home," Iris told me. "I *willed* you to answer it."

Their guests (more congenial than at the lunch in Oxford) included an elderly agent, Lady Avebury; a children's book publisher, Sebastian Walker; a young woman, Mary-Kay Wilmers, then on the staff (and now editor) of *The London Review of Books*; Robert and Shirley Letwin, he teaching at the London School of Economics, she the author of a book on Trollope; and John Simopoulos, a Greek philosophy don at St. Catherine's (John's college), who reminisced, "I used to review for an important journal . . . but it packed up twenty years ago!"

The stairs up to the flat were steep, the rooms small, the kitchen rudimentary, and we felt grateful for the warm hospitality. The food was weird—and famously so. On their crowded table we had cold mackerel with lovage, chervil, and mayonnaise; two kinds of stew in watery gravy—one with

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frankfurters, one (John's ghastly specialty) with nettles; store-bought cakes; and many bottles of excellent twelve-year-old wines from the cellars of St. Cat's. Six of them were opened and served at the same time, which rather spoiled the effect. But this evening was not about fine dining. Iris and John were real bohemians—friendly and lively and talkative as ever.

Iris wore an odd, attractive outfit: black breeches and stockings, ruffled blouse and velvet jacket. She'd recently gained weight and looked a bit top-heavy. She didn't have much time to talk while entertaining eight guests, but told me she was terribly overworked. She was writing a philosophy book in the mornings and, as a rest from that labor, a novel in the afternoons. They were soon going to Berkeley, where John would give the Beckman lectures. But they were very vague about where and what sort of place it was, and unaware of its spectacular setting across the bay from San Francisco. They eagerly asked about places to see and I whetted their appetite by describing the houses of Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London, the Russian River and Napa Valleys, Carmel and Monterey, Big Sur and the Hearst Castle at San Simeon. Later on in letters, she recalled the wonderful asparagus and California wine they had in Berkeley. They stayed at the Women's Faculty Club on campus and were lulled to sleep by Strawberry Creek. Iris liked to quote her friend Richard Wollheim's remark that "Berkeley's the most wonderful place in the English-speaking world."

Iris and I corresponded about the ups and downs of publishing. She became quite angry (and revealed her essential naiveté about publishers) about the muddle surrounding the reprint of her first book: "a disgraceful firm called Harvester Press once published (republished) a book of mine on Sartre. The book was called *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*. They produced a book entitled *Sartre: Romantic Realist*. On receiving a copy I pointed out this mistake. They apologised (vaguely), and I assumed they wd destroy all copies. They sold them all, and now I'm credited in some lists with two different books!"

Iris and John had moved in April 1986 from Cedar Lodge, the house in Steeple Aston, to Hamilton Road, North Oxford. As they got older they found it difficult to deal with a large house and garden, the lack of shops, the constant commute to and from Oxford. But after three and a half years in Hamilton Road they became disturbed by the noise and by nearby "vandalising elements." One weekend, without consulting her, John impulsively bought another place, and in the fall of 1989 they moved to a larger house in North Oxford, which they thought would have more room for their books.

Iris and I met for the last time at this house in July 1992. John was retiring and had been moving in hundreds of books from his office at St. Cat's. There was not enough room for them and they were piled up everywhere. The front garden was overgrown—Iris was no good at employing people, she said, inside or out—but the back, which she tended herself, looked orderly. I brought along an article from that day's *Independent* about Cedar Lodge. It had been turned into a bed and breakfast hotel. Iris didn't want to look at the article and seemed pained by the idea. Ever on the move, she and John had just returned from a wet holiday in Cornwall, where they had rented a house and cooked for themselves, walked in the rain, and read a lot of books. She was soon going to the country to stay with the widow of her illustrator, Reynolds Stone, and would then travel to Italy.

A. N. Wilson was working on her biography but hadn't got very far. She didn't know his publisher (which was Century-Hutchinson) and said he was also writing a novel. Later on she told me that Wilson had finally given up her biography to write one about Christ. Iris was "appalled" at the idea of having her biography written, yet felt it was inevitable and added: "I do rather hope this matter can be postponed until I have left the scene." But when Wilson finally

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abandoned the project, he was succeeded by Peter Conradi.

Iris's mop of hair was now wispy and gray, her complexion a bit blotchy, and some hairs sprouted on her upper lip. She wore an untidy smock, tucked her trousers into her socks and walked with a sailor's rolling gait. We lunched in a mediocre Italian restaurant (we agreed about most things, but not about food). She ordered a bottle of red wine and rapidly devoured a large meal. It was unnerving to see her concentrate on the food rather than the conversation. She seemed much less lively, curious, and responsive than usual, more unfocused, distracted, and withdrawn. Instead of lingering at the table, as we always did, she seemed to find conversation a burden and was eager to get home. In the car I said she was a precious cargo and asked her to fasten her seat belt. Smiling, she said, "I'll risk it."

In her last letters Iris began to complain of fatigue and of the great demands made upon her. She found it increasingly difficult to keep up with her correspondence and write her novels. I myself found it difficult to finish, or even start, her late fiction, which she faithfully sent me. Forced rather than fluent, her novels now seemed—with their convoluted plots, freakish characters, and bizarre sexual entanglements—a tedious reprise of her earlier work.

In November 1993, she wrote that she received about twenty letters a day and had trouble answering them, but did so out of a sense of duty. That year she also began to express uncharacteristic complaints about the failure of her imaginative powers: "I am now very much at a loss, unable to conjure up any new scene. So I am a bit depressed." Later on she repeated: "Of course I am trying to write a novel, but it is unusually difficult. Signs of age and time perhaps." Comparing herself to an acrobat, she added: "I am trying to begin another novel but cannot so far. (Perhaps it is time to stop juggling, and fall off the high wire. I hope not however!)"

In December 1994, I reviewed a biography of Anna Akhmatova, who seemed her kindred spirit, and tried to cheer Iris up by sending one of her poems:

> Everything is for you: my daily prayer
> And the thrilling fever of the insomniac,
> And the blue fire of my eyes,
> And my poems, that white flock.

In her penultimate letter to me, she replied: "Many thanks for your lively letter and the lovely POEM! It is indeed a *brilliant* poem and I feel it close to my heart!" In her last letter she wrote: "Jeffrey, dear, thank you so much for writing to me—with lots of love. Iris . . . You are really super."

I loved and respected Iris, felt grateful for her praise and her friendship, sustained over eighteen years. I remembered that her mother had had senile dementia, felt something bad was happening, but didn't know what was wrong. I was deeply touched by her lonely need to go on writing, by her desperate struggle to retain her mental powers. Eventually, in February 1997 a report in *The New York Times* confirmed what I had feared:

> Iris Murdoch, the 77-year-old British novelist, is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. . . . Ending months of speculation in the British literary world about her writer's block, Professor Bayley . . . said he first suspected something was wrong about two years ago when she failed to turn up for an appointment with friends. "She had completely forgotten where she was going so she decided to come home. It was so startling." . . . Six months ago, she likened her so-called writer's block to being in "a hard dark place" from which she was trying to escape.

In a poignant letter sent toward the end of 1997, John described Iris as "deep in Alzheimer's now. All scans & medication etc. tried but nothing helps much, tho' she remains as *sweet* as ever. . . . But it's very rewarding to look after Iris, in a strange way, tho' nothing remains of the great creative mind, nothing."

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The life and times of Fanny Burney

by Jeremy Bernstein

My sister then played another duet with my father; but Dr. Johnson was so deep in the Encyclopedie *that, as he is very deaf, I question if he even knew what was going forward. When this was over, Mrs. Thrale in a laughing manner said, "Pray, Dr. Burney can you tell me what that song was and whose, which Savoi sung last night at Bach's concert, and which you did not hear?" My father confessed himself by no means so good a diviner, not having time to consult the stars, though in the house of Sir Isaac Newton. However, wishing to draw Dr. Johnson into some conversation, he told him the question. The Doctor, seeing his drift, good-naturedly put away his book, and said very drolly, "And pray, Sir, who is Bach? is he a piper?"*

—The Early Diaries of Frances Burney

If you look up "Frances Burney" in an encyclopedia you are likely to find two listings. One will be under the name "Fanny Burney" since that was a nickname that many people used—although Dr. Johnson, who was especially fond of her, referred to her as "Fannikins." You will also find her listed as "Madame d'Arblay." That is because in 1793, after a brief courtship, much to the surprise of her family, probably to her own surprise at the age of forty-one, she married Alexandre Gabriel Jean-Baptiste Piochard d'Arblay, adjutant-general to Lafayette. How Fanny Burney, in midlife, met and married a French general is part of the charm of her life story.

That Fanny Burney married late was certainly not because she was unattractive. There is a portrait of her painted by her cousin Edward Francisco Burney hanging in the National Portrait Gallery in London. In the words of one of her recent biographers, Kate Chisholm, it

> shows a young woman in half-profile, shyly looking away from the artist (and her audience). She has soft blue eyes, full and shapely lips, rosy cheeks and lightly powdered fair hair, gently curling to her shoulders. Her simple gray dress is tightly waisted and has long tapered sleeves; a cream muslin fichu is tucked into the bodice. She wears no jewelry, but a large strawberry-pink bow is pinned to her petite bosom. Black gloves and a black lace shawl would complete the impression that here is a woman of gentle spirit and modest pretensions—except that she is wearing a magnificent hat. This dusky-gold "Lunardi," ruffled, trimmed, and flounced, was the height of fashion in the autumn of 1784, named after the daring exploits of the balloonist Vincenzo Lunardi. It dominates the portrait and quite transforms Fanny from an unexceptional society belle into someone who compels our attention.

Before I explain why Burney "compels our attention," I owe the reader an explanation of why she compelled my attention. Not being a student of the literature of eighteenth-century England, I did not come

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to Burney in any way that you are likely to guess. It began in Kathmandu in the spring of 1987. I was on my way to Tibet, which I was intending to write about, and a friend of long standing invited me to forage in his extensive private library. Many of the books were familiar to me, but one wasn't. It was entitled *The Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa* (1876), edited by a man named Clements Markham. Bogle, born in Scotland in 1746, had been in India since 1769 when he went out as a "writer"—the lowest order of clerk—with the British East India Company. Unlike most of the young writers, whose only thought was to get rich quick and to return to England before the climate killed them, Bogle became fascinated by India. He learned many of the languages including Persian, the language of diplomacy. In the early 1770s, the British were having trouble with their Bhutanese neighbors to the north and took action against them militarily. This, in turn, alarmed the Tibetans, and the Governor General of India, Warren Hastings, decided in 1774 to send a diplomatic mission north to Bhutan and Tibet to arrive at a *modus vivendi*. He chose Bogle as its leader and this mission is what is described in these journals.

As I read the journals, and the fascinating and wonderfully written letters which Bogle wrote to his family, I kept coming across the figure of Warren Hastings. He was certainly the most brilliant and erudite Englishman ever to govern India. His curiosity was insatiable and he charged Bogle to bring back anything—animal or vegetable—that could be transported from Tibet and Bhutan. He did not bargain for one of Bogle's imports, which was a Tibetan wife. She is not mentioned in the journals, which have been edited for Victorian consumption, but her children have been traced to Scotland where they were sent after Bogle died in India of disease in 1781. Hastings, by the way, instructed Bogle to plant potatoes as he went along and their descendants now make up a good portion of the staple diet of these countries. What emerges in these journals is both Bogle's unlimited admiration for Hastings and the fact that Hastings was in a good deal of trouble. He and his council in Calcutta were at loggerheads, and upon his return to England in 1785 he found himself the subject of a parliamentary inquiry which led in 1788 to his being tried for "high crimes and misdemeanors." The trial, which was a sensation at the time, lasted seven years; he was acquitted on all charges, but was financially and politically ruined.

What does all of this have to do with Fanny Burney? When I shifted my attention from Bogle to Hastings, I began asking questions about him of people who might be knowledgeable. One of them was a professor of English at Rutgers University named W. C. Dowling, who in fact teaches the literature of this period. When I mentioned my interest in the Hastings impeachment trial, he asked if I had read the diaries of Fanny Burney. To be quite truthful, at the time I had only the foggiest idea of who Burney was, let alone what was contained in her diaries, but having a good deal of faith in Dowling I decided to look into the matter. I haven't stopped yet.

The first thing you will discover if you want to read the diaries is that they are not all that easy to get hold of. Burney began keeping her journals in 1768 and they continue to her death in 1840. You cannot simply go down to your neighborhood bookstore and buy them the way, for example, you can readily buy Boswell's journals. At the present time there is no single edition that begins in 1768 and ends in 1840, and it seems unlikely that there ever will be. There is a project which has been started by Lars E. Troide of the department of English of McGill University to do the years from 1768 to 1791 to complement the twelve-volume Oxford edition edited by Joyce Hemlow which goes from 1791 to 1840. Professor Troide has published three volumes that take us up to 1779. Nine more are due. All of this was much more than I wanted to deal with. Instead, what I chose to do was to use the two-volume edition of

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the "Early" diaries which stops in 1778 and then to join them to the wonderful six-volume edition of the later diaries edited by Burney's niece Charlotte Barrett. This edition was first published in the years 1842–46. If you scout used book stores you can find it, often in later printings. (There is a one-volume edition that should be avoided since it contains only a fraction of the material.) It is beautifully illustrated and contains adequate references. Barrett, incidentally, did not try to pry under Burney's inked-over passages which the new editions attempt to do. Once you begin reading the journals you will discover that they read like a novel—a great historical novel. For reasons I will shortly explain, this is not too surprising. For me, the surprise was the extent of Burney's connections to Hastings.

At the end of his career in India, Hastings had a personal physician named Clement Francis. He was one of Hastings's coterie that left India with him. For reasons I have not been able to discover, while in India, Francis decided to propose marriage to Fanny Burney. As far as I can make out they had never met. I do not even know what their mutual connection was. In any event, upon visiting the Burney home—which, incidentally, had been the final residence of Isaac Newton in London—he met Burney's younger sister Charlotte. He fell in love with her and they were married in 1786. Francis then worked as a country doctor in Aylsham until his death in 1792. At the time of the marriage, both sisters were living at home (the two other sisters and the two other brothers were already married). With the departure of Charlotte, Burney was left at home with a stepmother she could not stand and a father who loved her but did not understand her very well.

One consequence was that in 1786 Burney accepted the position as Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte, the German-born wife of George III. I will come back to this later but I want to note here that the Keeper of the Robes was a dreadful German woman named Juliana Elizabeth Schwellenberg who had come over with Charlotte at the time of her marriage in 1761. In her journals, Burney, who had perfect pitch for dialogue and dialect, turns Schwellenberg into one of the great comic villains in literature. However, it was Schwellenberg who some years earlier had introduced her countryman the Baron Carl von Imhoff, and his wife Anna Maria, to Queen Charlotte. This resulted in Imhoff's getting a junior position with the British East India Company. On the boat to India —a voyage which often took six months —Hastings met the Baroness. They fell in love and were later married. I will describe some of the other connections after I have told you some more about Burney's life.

Charles Burney, Fanny's father, was from an aristocratic family which had fallen into decay. Throughout his life he was very conscious of class distinctions and quite insecure about his own. To be close to true aristocrats—to say nothing of the royal family—was for him like being showered with angel dust. As a very young man he displayed considerable talents as a musician. He both sang and played the organ. It was suggested that he go to London to further his musical studies. While there, he found employment in theater orchestras which, considering the low esteem in which theater people were held, must have caused him some concern. It is not surprising that he next took employment as the private music master to an upper-class family. He was meant to go to Europe with them but fell in love with a woman called Esther Sleepe. By the time they married in 1749, they had already had their first child, Esther, who was always known as "Hetty." The fact that Hetty's birth preceded her parent's marriage you will not find mentioned in Burney's journals, unless it is in one of the inked-over parts.

Other children followed almost annually and to support his growing family Charles Burney took on a variety of musical odd jobs including rehearsing the singers for Handel's oratorios. But before Fanny Burney's birth, he had moved the family to the

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Norfolk port town of Lynn Regis. He had decided that the air in London was endangering their health. Fanny Burney was born in Lynn Regis on June 13, 1752. There they lived until 1760 when they moved back to London.

Musical entertainment was always part of the Burney family life. Either the senior Burney performed alone or with one of Fanny's sisters. I do not know the extent of Fanny Burney's musical talent, but whatever it was, public performance was out of the question for her; she was almost pathologically shy. What she did do was to record. If there is such a thing as having a photographic memory for conversation, Burney had it. But it went beyond this. She reordered her observations so that they made a great narrative. Like so many "naturalistic" plays and films, her written dialogues sound like conversations, but no conversations sound like that. It is important to keep this in mind when one reads the journals.

In the first place, they are not private diaries such as Pepys's or Boswell's London diaries. What is in them was meant to be read by others. Indeed, most of the entries are copies of letters sent or received. Some of these letters are several pages long, so to retranscribe them required some effort. If you read them attentively, you will see that they have an element of fiction. For example, in the spring of 1775 when Burney was twenty-two, as a favor to her sister she went on a visit to a family whom she describes as "very stupid." They had a boarder, a young man named Barlow. Barlow was immediately and hopelessly smitten with Burney. As Burney notes in her journal, "he has a great desire to please but no elegance of manners; neither, though he may be very worthy, is he at all agreeable." Upon leaving, there was kissing among the female members of the party and Barlow, taking advantage of the situation, kissed Burney. "I have seldom been more surprised," she writes, "I had no idea of his taking such a freedom." But then she adds, "He came down stairs with us and waited at the door, I believe, till the coach was out of sight." This last "I believe" is what a novelist would invent to complete a story.

In 1762, when she was ten, Burney's world crashed down upon her; her mother died. She had had nine pregnancies in thirteen years and the last childbirth had taken her life. For any child such a loss would have been devastating, but for Burney it was catastrophic. It became worse five years later when the senior Burney married a widow named Elizabeth Allen who had children of comparable ages to the Burney children. It is unlikely that any stepmother would have been welcomed by Burney, but Mrs. Allen seemed to have little comprehension of her. One wonders whether Burney would have survived these traumas if it had not been for a friend of her father named Samuel Crisp. He had retired to the country where the Burneys often visited him. He did understand her and many of the longer letters in her journals are addressed to "daddy Crisp." It should also be understood that none of the Burney daughters were allowed a formal education. Fanny Burney was self-taught and what reading she was allowed to do was carefully supervised by her father. This continued even into her twenties. Dr. Johnson offered to teach her Latin and Greek, but her father would not give his permission since some literature in those languages might not be suitable. When Burney was fifteen she had some sort of encounter with her stepmother as a result of which she burned everything she had written. This included parts of a novel that she had called *The History of Caroline Evelyn*. In light of this, what happened in the next few years is almost beyond belief.

Sometime in her late teens, Burney began a new novel, *Evelina*, in secret. She was then being employed by her father as an amanuensis. She copied out the chapters of the book he was writing on the history of music. While writing *Evelina*, Burney disguised her handwriting, and wrote mostly at night, by candlelight in her bedroom under the eaves near where Isaac Newton

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had had his observatory. Nearly everything is remarkable about this enterprise. Burney had essentially no role models. The few women writing fiction in English were older and had had an entirely different set of life experiences. Most remarkable to me is that Burney knew how good it was. No one told her, because no one had seen it. *Evelina* consists entirely of letters—like her journals—some of which are written to a substitute father like her own "daddy Crisp." What is equally remarkable is the range of characters: from aristocrats to prostitutes. It is true that the Burney household often entertained theater women who, for many, were little better than prostitutes, but somehow she managed to transform these people into the real thing.

Burney was convinced that it should be published. But how? In fact, when she made this decision the novel was not even finished. She was trying to sell an incomplete novel written by an author who would not reveal her identity. In this madcap scheme she enlisted the help of her brother Charles who was disguised as "Mr. King." Remarkably, a publisher was found, Thomas Lowndes, who wrote, "Sir, I've read and like the Manuscript and if you'll send me the rest I'll soon run it over." Two of the eventual three volumes of *Evelina* were turned over by "Mr. King" to Lowndes. She was now under pressure to deliver the third and so she asked time off from her work with her father to complete the book. Fortunately, she did not show her father the incomplete novel so he never knew until after it was published what it contained or even what its title was. I say "fortunately" because later in her career, when he did get into the process, the effect was not beneficial. The third volume was given to Lowndes by Burney's artist cousin Edward since Charles had been sent down from Cambridge and was in disgrace. Lowndes offered twenty guineas—later raised to thirty—for the rights. In view of the unframed art he was buying, it is difficult to argue that he underpaid. However, the book, which was published in 1778 under the full title of *Evelina: or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, became an immediate sensation in London. It has been in print from that day to this.

The great question became who wrote it. Nearly everyone assumed that it must have been a man. One exception was Joshua Reynolds who decided that it must be a woman and offered fifty pounds to meet her. Burney's father, who had still not read the novel, came across a favorable review of it. When he discussed this with Burney's sister Susan, she told him that it was her sister who had written it. The senior Burney was flabbergasted, but once having read the book he began spreading the news. One of the first places was at the home of Hester Thrale—Streatham—at which Dr. Johnson was almost a perpetual guest. In March of 1777, at Streatham, Burney had her first encounter with Dr. Johnson. Her description of the great man is one of the high points of the early journals. She writes,

> He is, indeed, very ill-favoured; is tall and stout; but stoops terribly; he is almost bent double. His mouth is almost constantly opening and shutting, as if he was chewing. He has a strange method of frequently twirling his fingers, and twisting his hands. His body is in continual agitation, *see-sawing* up and down; his feet are never a moment quiet; and, in short, his whole person is in *perpetual motion*. His dress too, considering the times, and that he meant to put on his *best becomes*, being engaged to dine in a large company, was much out of the common road as his figure; he had a large wig, snuff-colour coat, and gold buttons, but no ruffles to his shirt.

Dr. Johnson truly loved Burney and he loved her novel which he thought was one of the best ever written in English. Their friendship lasted until his dying day in 1784. When, after Dr. Johnson's death, Boswell tried to get information for his biography from her she refused to cooperate, feeling that this was an invasion of his privacy. As her later journals show, she did not much

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care for the book. She and Boswell had a wary relationship. Boswell was always trying, literally and figuratively, to get the seat closest to Dr. Johnson which was often occupied by Burney. Dr. Johnson and others, including Richard Brinsley Sheridan who was then running the Drury Lane Theater, wanted Burney to turn her talents to writing a comic play. She did. It was called *The Whitlings*. A play was different from a novel in that the author was meant to be present while it was being rehearsed, which would mean a close association with actors and actresses in the theater itself. On this, both her father and "daddy Crisp" were very cautionary given the social status of theater people. They were even more cautionary when they were given the play to read. It was a satire involving recognizable socialites—the kind who were her father's patrons. When her father and "daddy Crisp" objected violently to the play, Burney simply withdrew it.

She then wrote a novel, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, which was published in 1782. The Penguin edition of *Evelina*, including the introductory notes and the footnotes, runs to five-hundred-and-five pages. The World's Classics edition of *Cecilia*, including the same, runs to one-thousand-and-four pages! *Evelina* had put on weight. In my view, none of Burney's later fiction compares to *Evelina*, although *Cecilia* contains the memorable line "The whole of this unfortunate business . . . has been the result of pride and prejudice," a line which we know Jane Austen read.

Whatever Burney's life—with its parties and musical evenings at home—may have appeared to others, it must have been clear to her that she had reached something of a dead end. There were episodes of illness which we would certainly diagnose as being psychosomatic. Furthermore, in 1783, at the age of seventy-eight, "daddy Crisp" died leaving an emotional void for Burney. But that same year she made the acquaintance of an eighty-three-year old woman named Mary Delany. For Burney, Mrs. Delany was the reincarnation of her maternal grandmother. She visited her often in a house that had been provided by the royal family who also loved her. Indeed it was at Mrs. Delany's house in December of 1785 that she had her first encounter with the king and queen. In her journal entry, she manages in a few short paragraphs of dialogue to give an indelible image of the king's rather lovable eccentricity. Like a character out of P. G. Wodehouse, he introduced the conversation as follows:

> "But what?—what?—how was it?"
>
> "Sir?," cried I, not well understanding him.
>
> "How came you—how happened it—what?—what?"

Divining that he was talking about *Evelina*, she replied,

> "I—I only wrote, sir for my own amusement—only in some idle hours."
>
> "But your publishing—your printing—how was that?"
>
> "That was only sir—only because . . . I thought—sir—it would look very well in print."

As it happened, about this time the post of the Second Keeper of the Robes to the Queen became vacant and the queen offered it to Burney. It should be understood that the Second Keeper of the Robes was a glorified lady's maid. She was on call from early morning to late at night to help the queen dress and undress and, in the case of Queen Charlotte, mix her snuff. It paid two hundred pounds a year and, in addition to a small apartment, there was an assigned maid and footman. But there were no vacations and, like all palace personnel, her personal life would be dictated by the queen who would approve of any visitors and even of the books that came to the palace.

Burney understood this and had serious doubts about accepting. But pressure was put on her. Her father was in heaven at the notion of his daughter's being in such proximity to the royals. It is probable that he

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saw the connection as leading to various royal favors for himself, something that was enhanced when a palace representative implied to Burney that this was likely to be the case. As it happened, the senior Burney never got any royal preferments. Burney certainly would have resisted if she had known about the dreadful toad-eating Madame Schwellenberg whose assistant she was about to become. Schwellenberg was erratic, mean-spirited, and childishly demanding. The few quiet hours Burney might have had to herself were lost since Schwellenberg insisted that she play cards with her.

The only writing Burney could do in the five years she served the queen was what she called her "Court" journals. These journals provide a fascinating account of the world of the court with occasional glimpses of the world outside. Everyone will take away different impressions from them, but, for me, the two highlights are the illness of King George and the trial of Warren Hastings.

The illness of the king first enters Burney's journals in October of 1788. From then, until February of 1789, when Burney seems to have been the first person to witness the beginnings of the king's slow return to normalcy, the journals are a litany of his afflictions. She was not allowed to see him in person during much of this period, but then neither was the queen. However, the queen had instructed Burney to be at the king's bedroom door at dawn to receive the latest news from the doctors and then to give her a full and honest report. When I read them in the journals, I kept thinking of Lewis Thomas's remark about early medicine; it was by trial and error, usually in that order. On February 2, 1789, Burney took her morning walk in Kew Gardens, having been assured that the king was elsewhere. She was astonished—indeed horrified—to see him appear in the gardens accompanied by his doctors. When she tried to run away, he ran after her calling her name. He caught up to her and they had a heart-to-heart talk. It was clear that he knew about Madame Schwellenberg. The last thing he said to Burney was, "Never mind her! . . . depend upon me! I will be your friend as long as I live!" And he was.

Burney got to see a few of the high points of the Hastings trial, which began on February 13, 1788, before the full parliament in Westminster Hall. Tickets were almost impossible to get, but the queen gave Burney hers, expecting that Burney would give her a complete report. Her description of the scene in Parliament is now part of the literature of that period. By this time Burney had met Hastings socially and liked him very much. It also must be remembered that her sister was married to one of his closest associates. It is unlikely that Burney had much of a grasp of the very complex issues on which the impeachment rested. But she was absolutely certain that the man she knew could not be the villain he was being described as. The experience was wrenching for her because she was also a close friend of Edmund Burke who was Hastings's principal antagonist. She did something at the trial that could have put her at great risk. One must remember that she had come to the trial with the tickets of the queen so that what she said, and did, could be interpreted as representing the views of the palace. What she tried to do, when she saw people like Burke, was to persuade them that they were wrong. She reconstructs these dialogues in her journals and one is struck by her tenacity. If word of this had gotten back to the palace, where the view of Hastings was by no means so favorable, Burney would have found herself in very grave trouble indeed. When Hastings was finally acquitted on April 23, 1795, one of the first letters of congratulation came from Burney who was, by this time, Madame d'Arblay and the mother of a son, Alexander Charles Louis d'Arblay.

By the time of Burney's later appearances at Hastings's trial, it was clear to everyone who knew her that she was seriously ill. The routine at the palace had undermined her health. Even Boswell, who was not one of her admirers, wanted to organize a petition

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to her father to insist that Burney be allowed to resign. In October of 1790, Burney asked permission of the queen to be allowed to leave. It took until July of the following year before it was granted. Schwellenberg was, needless to say, beside herself. The queen was correct but not overly generous; she granted Burney a pension of a hundred pounds a year—half her salary, but not really enough to live on. The senior Burney had moved house and in the new quarters there was not adequate space for Burney.

But she was now taken under the wing of an older widowed friend: a Mrs. Anna Ord. Mrs. Ord took Burney on a tour of the spas. They first stopped at Westminster. As it happened, a small group of French aristocrats had settled there after having fled the excesses of the French Revolution, people like the Comte de Mirabeau and Talleyrand. It was Burney's first encounter with this French colony, but a few months later her sister Susan reported the arrival of General d'Arblay. He had made a great impression on her, and when finally Burney met him in January of 1793 she soon decided that this was the man that she had waited for all her life. D'Arblay felt similarly about her, and he invented a device for them to get to know each other better. Burney spoke little French and d'Arblay not much English, so he proposed that they write "essays" to each other to learn the languages. The essays turned into love letters and by the spring of 1793 they had decided to get married.

Burney senior behaved exceedingly badly. He refused to meet General d'Arblay or to sanction the marriage. Not only was d'Arblay a foreigner, he was also a Catholic. But by this time Burney had been through too much to let this deter her. On Sunday July 28, 1793, they were married in a Protestant church with Burney's brother James giving away the bride. Two days later they had a Catholic ceremony so that Burney might be able to inherit any of d'Arblay's property in France should he ever be able to reclaim it. Burney's only expressed regret was that she was not younger. It is true that d'Arblay was two years younger than she was but this was surely not what she meant. I am sure she meant that she wished she could have known such happiness earlier in her life.

The d'Arblays had little money. The queen's one hundred pounds did not go very far and the general had no profession he could practice in England. Burney set about trying to earn some money by writing. Her third novel, *Camilla*, which appeared in 1796 helped. In 1802, she went to France to join her husband who had returned to fight in Napoleon's army. Her French journals, much of which are written in French, describe this period. At first she admired Napoleon but came to find him loathsome. Somehow d'Arblay managed to survive the Napoleonic wars and she a bout with breast cancer that required a masectomy—an ordeal she famously underwent without anesthesia. In 1812, she and her son returned to England (he was to die six years later). In 1814, Burney returned to France and in 1815 witnessed the Battle of Waterloo. This ended d'Arblay's military career and the two of them returned to England later that year. Burney never again left England. D'Arblay made a brief return to France, but he came back to England to die in 1818 leaving Burney to live out the next twenty-two years of her life alone. She outlived every member of her immediate family. When she died on January 6, 1840, she was barely remembered as the author of *Evelina*, one of the great novels of the eighteenth century.

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Poems
by Elizabeth Spires & Harvey Shapiro

Reprieve, reprise

After the lord of the dark world carried her away, she was never again the gay young creature who had played in the flowery meadow without a thought of care or trouble. She did indeed rise from the dead every spring, but she brought with her the memory of where she had come from; with all her bright beauty, there was something strange and awesome about her. She was often said to be "the maiden whose name may not be spoken."

—Edith Hamilton, in *Mythology*

Mother, I had a vision of you:
in what distant future did I see
your body shrouded in light,
jewelled and dusted in light?

A premonition, I thought,
of a future I'd have no part of,
where death overtook love
and love was powerless

to draw the loved one back.
For years I never spoke of it,
but now you lie in a room
that is not a room,

neither crypt nor tomb,
your body mapped with lines

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and X's that guide the x-ray light
to seek out what is dark, malign.

A door closes between us,
and I see you captured
on a screen, in still repose:
my vision carried all these years!

A hand twirls a dial, a whir
for a few brief seconds, light
piercing through you, then silence.
With a click, the door opens

and you are given back—
you pass back through the door!—
something the dead cannot do
so I know you cannot be dead.

You return, as once a daughter
passed from a dark underworld
back into her mother's arms
(*but I am daughter here, not you*),

how gratefully she passed back.
I see them standing in a field
at noon, the light too bright
to bear, no shadows anywhere.

What do they hear? They hear
the birds, the wind, the brook.
And Nature says what it always
says, what always remains unheard:

Happiness is fleet. Like water running
over stones, the words repeat:
Happiness is fleet, is fleet, is fleet . . .
Or do they imagine it so?

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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White curtain

Late that afternoon, I lay
on the bed, the wind
blowing through the room.
It was fall, the days gold.

The white curtain, sheer
as a soul, lifting in the wind.
As if a hand, unthinking hand,
disturbed its calm repose.

It fluttered and rose.
Fluttered and rose.
Or did it twist in mortal
agony? I didn't know.

Unceasing flow!
The everlasting present
passing, forever passing,
through our lives,

the drift and pull of pain
remembered, my name
called out in a dream,
and the question,

Mother, where are you?
The wind saying everything,
nothing that I didn't already
know: *She is dying*.

Light. Tears. Breath. Wind.
I watched and could do
nothing as the curtain
rose and fell.

—*Elizabeth Spires*

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Brooklyn

The lights of two bridges
framed in my study window
are more pleasant to me
because more constant to me
than the ornate lit cathedral
across from my hotel in Barcelona.
Let them be my memorial candles
when I am through with this world.

—*Harvey Shapiro*

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Theater

Lowered expectations

by Mark Steyn

A constitutional amendment prohibiting shows about putting on shows and writers writing about writers should have been passed long ago. But, of the two, the former is, on balance, preferable: the backstage musical is at least potentially mythic—*42nd Street*'s plucky chorine going out a youngster and coming back a star taps into something more than just song 'n' dance—and, flattering or not, there is a kernel of truth in the idea of show business as the central thruway of the American dream. But a writer writing about being a writer somehow invariably winds up shrinking the subject to something cramped and fetid and morbidly self-obsessed.

Brian Friel's *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (at the Gramercy) is a generic entry to the field. First seen in Dublin two years ago, the play presents us with two novelists—Garret Fitzmaurice (Gawn Grainger) is a hugely successful sellout prone to self-loathing, Tom Connolly (John Glover) is a critically respected commercial failure prone to self-admiration. A fellow from a Texan university which has already purchased Garret's archive flies to Ireland to enter into negotiations for Tom's. The exposition is booted across the footlights in as terse a shorthand as possible: as Tom's wife (Kate Burton) tells him, "We're broke, your royalties have dried up, you can't get on with that new novel, it's been seven years." Thanks. Once that's out the way, we settle down to real-time rumination, punctuated by lots of booze and the odd song. There is a not entirely plausible question of integrity: Tom has two unpublished but highly pornographic manuscripts in the attic, which the university is insisting on as part of the deal, and he needs money to pay for health care for a member of his family. His wife, the almost title role of Daisy, evokes the old song:

> "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do!
> I'm half crazy . . ."

Tom, like most writers, is half crazy, and Daisy has all the answers: "You're unhappy with the world you inhabit and you're more unhappy with the fictional world you create." What a stunning insight. Tom, for his part, talks mainly to Garret in literary quotations, unlike most real writers who, when they get together, tend to eschew Johnson and Swift for talk of royalty points and secondary rights.

Not all the characters are novelists, fortunately. There is that exquisite cadaverous miniature Joel Grey, of *Cabaret*, utterly miscast as a cocktail pianist who says things like "I sing, I dance, I play, keep it bubbly, act out the false affectations" and, in case we still haven't got it, concludes, "Only way I can cope." He, too, has a wife with all the answers: "You may be a cocktail pianist of some modest competence but you know nothing of literary manuscripts"—which sounds like an honorable mention in the

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Sentences You're Unlikely To Hear In The Course Of Your Life competition.

A cocktail pianist is surely a more interesting example of artistic frustration than an uncommercial novelist—years and years of piano lessons only to wind up practicing your art in a field where your ability is judged by your skill at going unnoticed. And, while an encounter between novelists of differing degrees of success has its tensions, it's as nothing compared to the pain a cocktail musician feels when he's in the presence of a real one: Speaking of Irish pianists, after a concert in Dublin in 1991, Frank Sinatra returned to his hotel, where a message was communicated to the night manager that he wished a bar to be set up with a little background music. The receptionist hustled a pianist out of bed and round he came. "What would you like to hear, Mr. Sinatra?" he asked. "I'd like to hear Oscar Peterson," said Frank, "but you'll have to do."

I don't recall the pianist's response—most likely a polite chuckle, followed by "Moonlight In Vermont." Yet, though rueful resignation will take you a long way, it's rarely articulated as explicitly or as crudely as Joel Grey in that "only way I can cope" speech. That goes for pretty well everyone here: instead of revealing character or motivation, they explain it. Brian Friel has spoken about the ghastly narcissism of writers, yet writing about the narcissism of writers comes across as even more narcissistic.

As the play progressed, I found myself recalling involuntarily my time as a BBC arts host and that dread moment in the literary calendar when the annual Booker Prize for Commonwealth fiction would roll around: I didn't mind the Canadians and Nigerians (though I drew the line at *The Bone People*, a winner for Maori feminist Keri Hulme), but anything English on the shortlist tended to be a novel by a North London novelist about a novelist in North London agonizing about the problems of being a North London novelist. No doubt, compared to being, say, a dirt poor dairy farmer or a frustrated accountant, the life of a writer is pure hell. The trouble is it's not intrinsically any more interesting than being a dairy farmer or an accountant. And even the best dramatists tend to come a cropper when they shine the spotlight on their own calling.

Indeed, *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* began to remind me of a previous attempt to address the subject. Until 1980 or thereabouts, the British playwright Peter Nichols had the gift of being able to draw comedy from the most unsettling material—*The National Health* (1969) deals with a grim English hospital ward of dying patients; *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* (1967) was explicitly autobiographical, drawn from his experience as the father of a disabled daughter—or, as one of the characters says, "a human parsnip." But in the early Eighties, Nichols became badly blocked and, eventually, like other authors in the same situation, he decided to write about it. One can hear all too easily the urgings of agents and producers: okay, you can't deliver the play you promised, we understand, you're an artist, we won't push you, you're badly blocked. . . . But maybe that's what you ought to be writing about.

So Nichols did. In 1986, he wrote *A Piece of My Mind*, about a writer confronting his own difficulties with writing. As in *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*, the writer with the problems gets to measure himself against someone immensely more glamorous and successful—in this case, a thinly-disguised Tom Stoppard called Miles Whittier. There were the usual Lloyd Webber gags, which rang a bit hollow for me, if only because the last time I'd spoken to Nichols had been at the first night of *Phantom of the Opera* a few weeks earlier, when he had seemed grateful to have gotten an invite. Nichols is a funny guy—you have to be to get laughs out of the subjects he's picked—but, in writing about himself, the bitterness and resentment overwhelmed him. Even the title, though intended as a pun, only reinforced the impression of Nichols as an angry, hectoring bore: "I'm coming right over to give you all a piece of my mind." The failure of a

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sour comedy about what he already saw as his comparative failure only soured him further. He retreated to the country, and the West End's not seen him since. "To make an audience cry or laugh is easy—they want to," he once said. "But this is only worth doing if one thereby catches a whiff of life, a true tang of the bitter mixture we all have to drink."

I wonder what he'd make of *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* Friel's protagonist, Tom Connolly, is strangely Nicholsesque: Not only is he a blocked, unsuccessful writer, but he also has a mute, mentally ill, institutionalized daughter. This all takes place in the Donegal village of Ballybeg, where most of Friel's work is set and which is beginning to take on the gloomy contours of Cabot Cove, Maine, the fictional setting of TV's *Murder, She Wrote*: each week in that long-running series, a hapless neighbor of Angela Lansbury was brutally murdered in order that the amateur sleuth would have a case to crack. Per capita, Cabot Cove had a higher murder rate than Detroit or Washington, D.C. Friel casts his net of human misery wider, but, even so, you can't help marveling at the sorrows with which every inhabitant of Ballybeg is afflicted: His principals here have to grapple not just with writer's block but also with arthritis, amnesia, alcoholism, kleptomania, and autism. Anyone who lives in a small town knows well enough the many burdens under which the citizenry labor, but the patness with which Friel passes his around underlines the calculation and striving for effect. In Peter Nichols' plays, the characters seem corroded by their lot—that's to say, you have the sense that who they are is something that's been formed naturally by time and circumstance. With Friel, you catch not a whiff of life but only of authorial organization; there's little here of the easy, flowing inevitability of his best work. And, with no evidence of any genuine relationship between the characters, the play slumps rapidly into bathos. Instead of sympathizing with the vicissitudes of a critically admired commercial failure, you find yourself marveling at the New York theater's indulgence of a critically admired, commercially doubtful writer.

Still, if you've seen *Dancing At Lughnasa* or *Aristocrats*, you'll know Friel is "Chekhovian." These days, any play involving three members of a rural family looking distractedly out of a window qualifies as Chekhovian, and Friel has milked the association as assiduously as anyone. The problem with Chekhov (from the management's point of view) is that he's Russian and no one's much interested in Russia. But put Chekhov in Ireland and suddenly you're in business. In fairness, Friel's translation of *Uncle Vanya* was perfectly fine and in places inspired. But otherwise the hand-me-down adjective is beginning to throttle him: Friel spends so much time trying to be Chekhovian he's forgotten how to be Frielian. And his reputation as the master of the genre must have been dealt a severe blow by the lumbering roadshow-*Vanya* scene the author glues on to the end of *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* Kyle Donnelly directs with a heavy hand that underlines the play's portentousness.

From writing about writing to shows about showbiz: *Epic Proportions*, at the Helen Hayes, is on Broadway and at Broadway prices for one reason only—its co-author is a co-author of the sitcom "Friends." That doesn't seem much of a reason to dust off a thirteen-year-old off-Broadway bit of fluff and charge sixty-five bucks to see it, but, if you're a Broadway producer, it'll do. David Crane has given the world (and NBC's advertisers) "Friends" and "Veronica's Closet," and, although not one in a million sitcom afficionados would recognize his name, to Broadway types he smells like a guy with his ear on the pulse of the zeitgeist du jour. So Jerry Zaks, the director who turned *Guys and Dolls* into an obnoxious cartoon, came on board, and suddenly *Epic Proportions* (which Crane co-wrote with Larry Coen) was a sexy package. It didn't quite work out that way up on stage. In previews, they decided that the

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play had problems and something needed to be cut. So they cut the intermission, which seems to have ensured (on the night I went) that theatergoers feel free to walk out in the middle of the scenes—and there's nothing they can do about that except padlock us in. As a result, *Epic Proportions* and its lost intermission are useful principally in reminding us how unlikely it is that skilled TV practitioners can be the salvation of the legitimate theater: Crane, a writer adept at delivering viewers neatly into the commercials, is now responsible for an evening where all that can be said with certainty is that the audience would not be back after the break.

Epic Proportions is a play, of sorts, set in the early Thirties in the Arizona desert, where two farm boys, Phil and Benny, are working as extras on a biblical epic directed by D. W. De Witt—a cross between D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. De Mille, at least as far as nomenclature is concerned: it turns out Coen and Crane just wanted a name that sounds like an old-time film director. That's only the first in an evening that might more accurately be billed as *Lowered Expectations*. If it seems odd to write a comedy about De Mille-sized biblical epics forty years after anyone's made one, one assumes it's because the authors had something to say about the relationship between Hollywood and religion—a subject that's certainly of topical interest. But no, they're not especially interested in biblical filmmaking—or even in filmmaking: in a remarkable innovation for the genre, this is the first play about movies to eschew any reference to the crassness and venality of producers and studios. While such a breakthrough deserves credit, the authors seem to have overlooked the fact that when you disdain the obvious you need to put something in its place. They can't seem to decide whether they're writing a satirical comedy about Hollywood or a metaphysical comedy in which the events on film are eerily mirrored by events off-camera, and so they dither ineffectually between one and the other.

What they're actually doing is TV sketch comedy: Sid Caesar and Carol Burnett are the ones we remember, but once upon a time this sort of thing was all over the screen. One week the show's ensemble pretends to be King Arthur and the Round Table ("Where have you stashed the lute?," "The knights are drawing in," etc.), the next Archimedes in his bath tub ("Eureka!" "Well, you don't smell-a so good yourself"), the following week Alexander Graham Bell and his assistant ("Bell, this line is amazing. You sound as if you're in the next room," "I am in the next room"). I have a fair degree of affection for this sort of thing, having tilled its hardscrabble soil from time to time over the years. You pick your subject, you think of everything associated with the subject, throw a hundred disconnected puns and quips at the wall and hope some of 'em stick. So Coen and Crane give us the following exchange:

> "It's the greatest story ever told!"
> "It's . . . okay."

But even the Bible-meets-Hollywood gags have been done better. In the Seventies, the Jewish TV impressario Lew Grade was making a mini-series on the life of Jesus for British television and anguishing over the ever-sprawling budget: "Do we have to have *twelve* disciples?" he sighed. It's a funny line—funnier if you know Lew Grade, funnier if you know the situation he was in at the time. But sketch comedy doesn't work like that—it's pure gags, unrooted, inconsistent. For example, in *Epic Proportions*, Kristin Chenoweth plays Miss Goldman, "the assistant director in charge of atmosphere personnel"—that's to say, extras. Ha-ha. But it's not exactly a 1930s joke, is it? It's our age—the Nineties—that has concocted elaborate circumlocutions for every mundane activity. The joke gets a laugh—more of a polite titter, really—but it's the kind of laugh that helps kill a play. A TV comedy is twenty-two minutes long and it relies on characters and jokes. The characters have been around for the best part of a decade so

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we already know them, and TV writers are expert at cooking up one-liners to service them. These days, by the way, there's very little "situation" in situation comedy, compared to the elaborate plots Lucy used to be called on to resolve in half-an-hour; shows like "Friends" and its many imitations are happy to sit a few people around an apartment, office, coffee joint, and let them say amusing attitudinal things to each other.

That won't work on stage. In a full-length drama, the jokes have to arise from the plot. Otherwise, the momentum dies. Even a furious farce such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* has at its core something real driving every character—the slave wants to be free, and so on—so the script has a clear logic behind every move. Coen and Crane lack that discipline—and, for the sake of a good joke, and often a dud, they abandon their story line and push it further and further into arbitrary exaggerations. D. W. De Witt decides, for no reason, that he doesn't want to make the film; farmboy Phil takes over and casts Benny and Miss Goldman in the leads, and, beyond the reach of credible absurdity, the play's life drains away, until, even by his own standards, Jerry Zaks's staging seems desperately frenzied. *Epic Proportions* turns into its desert set: a long bleak arid endless nothing, broken only by the occasional shallow oases of one-liners.

The idea that this play was ever big enough to hold the stage is the only thing that's truly laughable. The notion of a theater in which, as Peter Nichols puts it, we "catch a whiff of life," seems more remote than ever: If TV is to be the theater's salvation, we'd better get used to twenty-two-minute plays. Maybe they could just relay them on a cable channel and save us the parking costs.

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Art

Ingres at the Metropolitan

by Karen Wilkin

Like that other virtuoso of the rich and famous and their clothes, John Singer Sargent, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres hated painting portraits. It's difficult, of course, to imagine two painters more different: the prodigiously facile, seductive Sargent, who could suggest the gleam of satin and pearls with slapdash, wristy flicks of the brush, and the severe, reserved Ingres, no less adept at conjuring up the trappings of luxury, but whose tense, evocative line and polished surfaces seem to materialize without any evidence of the hand. Yet these two acclaimed painters seem to have had a similar clientele (allowing for the differences between their eras) and to have shared a similar dislike of the portrait genre. "Cursed portraits!" Ingres famously declared. "They always keep me from undertaking important things."

By important things, he meant the impressive public decorations, narrative paintings, and altarpieces that by the middle of the nineteenth century assured his reputation as France's greatest living painter—uplifting scenes from antiquity and mythology, recherché allegories and religious subjects (not to mention weirdly voluptuous, flash-frozen nudes) rendered with a geometric clarity and meticulous finish that embodied the academy's highest ideals. But if Ingres's exalted position at the height of his career was due to his "important things," his portraits were highly prized by his contemporaries. Portraiture brought him, while he was still in his twenties, one of his first important public commissions, and supported him during difficult times when he was in his thirties. For his contemporaries, Ingres's portraits reinforced his lofty reputation, even when he was a mature artist celebrated as a national institution, and, to present-day eyes, they often seem his most penetrating (and accessible) works. Unlike his ambitious narratives and allegories, they require no complicated interpretations. Unlike his nudes and feverish harem scenes, they present no ambiguities of intention. Modern viewers can get directly involved with Ingres's portraits both as paintings and as documents of personality and period.

Fortunately, despite his misgivings about the discipline, Ingres drew and painted portraits just about all his life, for which we must be deeply grateful. We should be deeply grateful, too, to the three museums who banded together to organize "Portraits by Ingres: Image of an Epoch,"[1] a spectac-

1 "Portraits by Ingres: Image of an Epoch" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on October 5, 1999 and remains on view until January 2, 2000. The exhibition was seen at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (May 23–August 22, 1999) and at The National Gallery, London (January 27–April 25, 1999). A catalogue of the exhibit, edited by Gary Tinterow and Philip Conisbee, has been published by the Metropolitan Museum and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (608 pages, $85, $50 paper).

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ular gathering of forty paintings and about ninety drawings by this rather difficult, sometimes remote master. It's a show of staggering impact, not only because of the elegance, refinement, inventiveness, and just plain brilliance of the works on view—a pleasure, to be sure, but no surprise—but also because of the thoughtful way in which the show has been organized at the Metropolitan, in an installation that both heightens our perceptions of Ingres's accomplishment as a portraitist and makes us think about the meaning of portraiture itself.

At the Met, the exhibition is arranged chronologically, which is not as simple an idea as it sounds, since as the informative wall texts remind us, Ingres (like Corot) had a remarkably long life—born in 1780 in Montauban, he died in Paris in 1867 at the age of eighty-six—that spanned some of the most dramatic political and aesthetic upheavals of France. He was, for example, an apprentice in Jacques-Louis David's atelier during the unstable period between the end of the Terror and Napoleon Bonaparte's assumption of power. When Napoleon declared a new republic and became First Consul in 1799, Ingres was a newly accepted student at the Ecole des Beaux-arts; when the First Consul crowned himself emperor, in 1804, Ingres, awarded the Grand Prix de Rome, had been waiting impatiently for three years for the state to come up with funds for his stay in Italy. (He finally got to go in 1806.) As a mature artist, Ingres witnessed the definitive defeat of Napoleon, the Bourbon Restoration, the July Monarchy, the Second Republic, and the Second Empire. In aesthetic terms, his life span was equally remarkable, bridging the shift from the archaeologically correct, high-minded Neoclassicism of David to the passionate Romanticism of Delacroix. (More about that later.)

Ingres's portraits include many of the most prominent of his contemporaries, from aristocrats and politicians to celebrated beauties and intellectuals, so as the exhibition's subtitle, "Image of an Epoch," announces, the show is also a remarkable record of changing mores and self-images, as well as a compendium of fashion, over almost six decades. One of the young painter's earliest important portraits was an immense full-length figure of Bonaparte as First Consul, in a nifty red velvet suit, completed in 1804 when Ingres was all of twenty-three. By the spring of that year, however, the declaration of the Empire made the image obsolete, provoking the ambitious young artist to produce an even larger, hieratic image of the seated imperial Napoleon as a fierce classical deity, muffled in robes, burdened by attributes, and staring straight out at the viewer. (Although the picture was exhibited at the Salon of 1806, to mixed reviews, it is not known if this was a commissioned work or a calculated bid for attention made on Ingres's own initiative.)

Both of these rather intimidating works come toward the beginning of the show, as images of abstract, public power. At the end of the exhibition, the rise of yet another ruling class is documented by a dazzling and deservedly celebrated group of portraits of society beauties of the 1840s and 1850s. In New York, these well-known, iconic images range from the coquettish Vicomtesse d'Haussonville in blue silk, chucking herself under the chin, from the Frick Collection, to the imposing Madame de Moitessier, all massive arms and poised fingers barely touching the side of her face, from the National Gallery, London. (In London, these *grandes dames* were joined by one of their Rothschild contemporaries.) In between are paintings and drawings that record other parts of the social spectrum, upper-class end: wealthy visitors to Rome and Florence, the French officials who governed Italy during the Napoleonic occupation, leaders of the artistic, financial, social, and intellectual life of Paris, and more. Then there is the private Ingres, which includes some of the most revealing works in the exhibition: portraits of Ingres's friends and family, fellow prize-winners at the French Academy in Rome, his young wife, his artist colleagues, and patrons—especially those

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from his sojourn in Florence—with whom he shared what appears to be an unusual sympathy. The Met's pendant portraits of Ingres's resourceful, well-connected friends and patrons, Jacques-Louis Leblanc and his wife, painted in 1823, are standouts in the last category, each picture a model of sober elegance and rich, subdued color, together a model of inventive likeness and unlikeness, symmetry and variation; the presence of other drawings of the Leblancs and their son is a bonus.

Collectively, these images of individuals presenting themselves as they wished to be seen, filtered though the perceptions of one of the most unsentimental eyes of all time, become a chronicle of behavior in the first six decades of the nineteenth century. There are notable differences between Ingres's depictions of the bold, adventurous (and probably opportunistic) civil servants and leaders of society in French-occupied Italy during the Empire and his apparently more conservative aristocratic subjects in Second Empire Paris. The former are among the most strikingly characterized portraits in the exhibition. Napoleon's tight-lipped Chief of Police for the Roman States, the Baron de Norvins (1811, reworked after 1814, National Gallery, London), challenges us, his black coat an eloquent silhouette against a red damask background. Confronted by Norvins's stern, sensual features, it's impossible not to think of the venal Scarpia and the horrible trick he plays on Tosca.

In contrast to the sinuous, black shape of Norvins, turned slightly sideways to the viewer, the bulky form of the entrepreneur Joseph-Antoine Moltedo (c. 1810, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), all but fills the canvas; a sliver of the Colosseum, visible between his hat and shoulder, situates him in Rome against a stormy sky. The sense of solidity is emphasized by the picture's harmonies of browns, blacks, and greenish blue-grays. A portrait of the inspector general of forests and waterways for the French-occupied Italian states, Charles-Marie-Jean-Baptiste Marcotte (1809, National Gallery, Washington), who was a lifelong supporter of Ingres, is another masterly orchestration of unnameable dull browns and blues, sparked by a creamy yellow vest and bit of red tablecloth. It's a palette that Manet might have been thinking about, in some of his early standing figures, and that even Braque might have learned from. (Braque's "pard" Picasso certainly revered Ingres.) But it is Ingres's revelation of an arresting blend of the puritan and the voluptuary in Marcotte's face that holds us as firmly as the picture's subtle play of textures and hues.

As we encounter them in Ingres's lapidary paintings and drawings, such men and their female counterparts, like the mother of the French Prefect of Rome, the imperious Comtesse de Tournon (1812, Philadelphia Museum of Art) in her modish green velvet gown, seem like people we might meet today—modern, self-assured, direct. It has something to do with the way they hold themselves, with their expressions, as Ingres presents them to us, even if we know little about the possibilities for rapid advancement and enrichment opened up by the occupation of Italy. The most vivid and famous example of this kind of immediacy, however, is to be found in a slightly later work, the astonishing portrait of Louis-François Bertin (1832, Musée du Louvre), the powerful, self-made publisher of the influential *Journal des débats*. Alert, tough, calm, and palpably intelligent, Bertin faces us, hands on his thighs, as though braced for confrontation, more imperious and apparently more powerful than Ingres's image of Napoleon as emperor. By contrast, Ingres's sitters of a slightly younger generation, the highly placed people who posed for him in the 1840s and 1850s, often seem more reticent and more remote from our experience. They seem to move less easily, to be more constrained by their clothing, and to offer a less transparent, more carefully designed version of themselves to the viewer.

Or is this simply a reflection of their being commissioned society portraits, executed at a particular stage of Ingres's ca-

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reer? In 1841, he had returned to Paris, full of honors, after a six-year stint as director of the French Academy in Rome. He was the recipient of many commissions for "important things," but there was an immense demand for his portraits. Contemporary documentation and extant preparatory drawings for them are proof of the time and labor these commissions required of him —he spent seven years on a portrait of the Baronne de Rothschild, three on the one of the Vicomtesse d'Haussonville. Part of this long gestation period was due to meticulous preparation, including a long search for a telling, characteristic pose, as well as meticulous execution. Part of it was due to the pressures of public commissions during these years, but there may also have been a certain reluctance on Ingres's part to actually work on the portraits. Whatever the explanation, the celebrated paintings of Madame Moitessier, the Princesse de Broglie, and the Vicomtesse d'Haussonville with which the exhibition comes to a triumphant end seem extraordinarily detached compared to the penetrating images of French officials in occupied Italy or the uncannily present portrait of Bertin. They are near-abstractions of texture, pattern, and weighty volumes, elaborately constructed reports on details of clothing and jewelry that only coincidentally record the appearance of the wearers of these opulent treasures.

That abstractness, of course, is part of the power of these paintings. The seated portrait of Madame Moitessier (1856, National Gallery, London), her pose derived from a Roman fresco, is as implacable as a rock wall. She is both noticeably *large* and preternaturally still, as though weighed down by the sheer accumulation of magnificent clothes and jewels. Immobile herself, she immobilizes the viewer by the intensity of her gaze. The reflection in the mirror behind her seems to heighten her remoteness by revealing an even more geometric and economical version of her broad face and fleshy shoulders, further distanced by being turned away from us, in profile.

Is the chilly self-containment of such portraits an equivalent for aristocratic arrogance or a reflection of Ingres's own detachment from an activity he disliked? He is said to have resented having to support himself by drawing and painting portraits of visitors to Rome in order to remain there after the term of his Prix de Rome was complete, and, later, to remain in Florence, where he and his wife moved after the fall of Napoleon changed the complexion of the French presence in Italy. Yet many of what the catalogue calls "independent portrait drawings" of these visitors are immediate and ravishing—miracles of sensitive draughtsmanship that seem to have been breathed onto the paper. The contrast between the carefully shaded heads and the comparatively loose, sketchily rendered details of clothing—no doubt an expedient way of satisfying client demands with a minimum of time expended—creates an absorbing pulse of textures, intensities, patterns, and tones across the page, equally rewarding from a distance and under close scrutiny; the cascading edge of a ruffle, the creases of a tight jacket strained by a paunch, a tuft of curling hair, all become fascinating and eloquent when Ingres's brilliant pencil describes them.

Paradoxically, these phenomenally fragile accumulations of line and tone are as tough as drawings can be from a formal point of view, but often Ingres has made his sitters look annoyingly pleasant by giving them saccharine little smiles. The result is that while the drawings are unfailingly subtle and beautiful, *qua* drawings, their subjects often appear to be slightly icky. They must have loved it, but it's as though Ingres inadvertently created a precedent for later photography, once exposures became short enough for something as mobile as an expression to be captured. In fact, Ingres's poses (like those of his followers and colleagues) with their solemn frontality seem like prototypes of the *carte de visite* portrait photos that came into vogue during the last decades of his life.

Even some of Ingres's portraits in oils are

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not exempt from this apparent desire to please the subject, although generally he seems to have been more forthright when painting commissioned portraits of men than women, especially young women. It's not that he flatters them in the usual sense of the word, but that he turns them into Art, with a capital A. In even the most powerful of his female portraits, Ingres tends to idealize, geometricize, and simplify, filtering the image of the person before him through his exhaustive knowledge of antique sculpture and of Italian painting, through Raphael, Bronzino, and Parmigianino, among others. The distinctly unglamorous Comtesse de Tournon is an exception, but she was sixty when Ingres painted her and she appears to have been a formidable personality who had no illusions about her appearance. As the grouping of works at the Metropolitan makes clear, Ingres was obviously most forthright when painting (or drawing) people to whom he was close, whether male or female. The difference between informal, "naturalistic," portraits of family and friends, and formal images, in which clothing and jewels and pose often tell us as much about the sitter as any description of features, is both arresting and informative. That difference tells us a great deal about both Ingres's practice and the desiderata of the period.

This dichotomy appears to have existed from the earliest days of his career. A series of subtle, but not very memorable profile heads, done while the ambitious teenager was a star pupil at the Academy of Fine Arts in Toulouse, bears witness to his precocious delicacy of touch and his command of a remarkable range of tone, but not to very much more. Then an unforgettable personality declares itself in an incisive drawing of Pierre-Guillaume Cazeaux (1798, private collection), an enlightened thinker, and possibly a friend of Ingres's father, who confronts us with an alert, ironic gaze from above his crisp white neckcloth. Similarly, among the works from the young Ingres's first years in Paris, some fairly insipid portraits of young women give only the vaguest idea of what he will be capable of, but a number of thoughtful male portraits from the early 1800s suggest that he is already in full command of his powers; a tender, affectionate image of his artist father and an insightful three-quarter depiction of a close friend, Jean-Pierre-François Gilibert, which the mature Ingres is supposed to have remained proud of, are as good as anything he did later.

Throughout the show, there is this kind of shift in the way the works address us. Over and over again, the brilliance and sensitivity of Ingres's draughtsmanship, his magical ability to transubstantiate paint into fabric, skin, lace, jewels, and feathers, and his unfailing eye for nuances of fashion clamor for our attention, and then other, subtler considerations make themselves felt, sometimes in the same picture, sometimes in different ones. But the most disquieting contradiction in Ingres's work, especially after his return to Paris from Italy in 1841, is the way a kind of simmering Romanticism seems to lurk beneath its frigid, dispassionate Classicism. There is a celebrated cartoon of Ingres and his rival Eugène Delacroix, the undisputed leader of painterly Romantic painters, as jousting knights, Ingres armed with a pen, as befits a master-draughtsman, Delacroix with a thick brush. The assumption is that there is no connection between these opposing factions, yet the longer we spend with Ingres's portraits, the more they come alive and the more their seductive textures, insistent linear rhythms, and firm volumes animate even the most "abstract" of his compositions and the most "Raphael-ized" of his characterizations. Just when we have decided that a particular image, such as the seated Madame Moitessier, is impressive but cool, a potent sense of barely suppressed sensuality moves us out of the realm of geometric order and high finish through a kind of purely optical voluptuousness. Put any Ingres portrait—or one of his bizarre mythological scenes, for that matter—beside one of David's austere paeans to republican virtue and Ingres starts

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looking like a kind of hard-edged Romantic instead of a Neoclassicist, or at least an epicurean rather than a stoic. (And yes, there are those "ladies' night at the Turkish bath" extravaganzas.) This paradox makes another cartoon of the period, showing a rigid, frozen viewer being carried out of an Ingres exhibition, seem a profound misunderstanding of the real effect of these unnerving and profoundly physical pictures.

"Portraits by Ingres: Image of an Epoch" is an exhibition that demands to be seen more than once. There's a lot to see and all of it requires—and rewards—close attention. The superb, comprehensive, copiously illustrated catalogue that accompanies the show, edited by two of the show's three curators, Gary Tinterow of the Metropolitan and Philip Conisbee of the National Gallery, Washington (Christopher Riopelle of the National Gallery, London, was the third), also requires and rewards close attention. It contains lucid, thoughtful essays and exhaustive entries on each of the works in the show by the curators and several other scholars of the period, along with a fine selection of comparative illustrations. We learn an enormous amount about Ingres, the people who sat for him, the intellectual and political climate of his times, and the way his work was received. The catalogue creates a context for the portraits within Ingres's entire oeuvre and discusses his influences and the responses to his example. The catalogue is an exemplary work that should become a standard reference on Ingres for some time to come. So is the show.

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The media

Childish wish-fulfillment

by James Bowman

Since my last essay in this space attempted to adumbrate the principle for would-be censors, we have seen a spectacular illustration of the truth that meaning depends on context—and of a characteristic political obtuseness in understanding it. In fact, the "Sensation" exhibit at Brooklyn Museum, discussed in detail by Roger Kimball elsewhere in these pages, takes us to the very limits of that principle, to the point at which there is no meaning apart from context. We have long been used to the postmodern definition of "art," which is that art is anything displayed as such in an art gallery or museum. The context is all, the content nothing. Yet somehow it still takes us by surprise every time another collection of worthless junk is packaged as art—given a context—precisely so as to create a sensation: even when the packagers advertise their purposes by calling it "Sensation." We seem unable to refrain from responding to it as if it were not packaging but art, as if it had some genuine content.

Naturally, the packagers depend upon that inability. Only on its account is the sensation duly generated and does the packaging work as it is designed to do. I only bring this up because the habit of responding to context as if it were content is not limited to those who haunt Lionel Trilling's bloody crossroads where art and politics meet. It is also the very foundation of America's media culture. Though it is now nearly four decades since Marshall McLuhan first warned us that, in the era of mass media, "the medium is the message," so deep lie the roots of American literalism that we continue to act as if it were not so, as if, in particular, what we see on television could be criticized and evaluated apart from the fact that we see it on television.

This thought, or something like it, came to me as my eye fell on Tom Shales's review in *The Washington Post* of the new television show on the WB network, "Angel." Shales's review claimed that the show, a spinoff from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" on the same network, "has enough imaginative cogitation and dark humor to make it more than just tolerable for adults as well"—as well, that is, as the teenagers it is intended for. Now Shales is an intelligent man. Why is he treating this bit of pop cultural fluff as if it were *King Lear*, full of "imaginative cogitation"—whatever that may be—and "dark humor." The answer came to me the next day with his review of "Roswell," another new WB show, this one about teen space aliens. By contrast with that of "Angel," the artistry of "Roswell" was dismissed by Shales as amounting to a tale of "Whining Wimps from Outer Space" who are "duller than the self-important little snots who populate many of WB's rather odious odes to adolescent angst."

So if they'd only been *as* dull and self-important and odious it would have been all right? The point is that in order for him to be able to criticize the one show in some-

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thing approaching the terms that it deserves, he has to find something to praise in the other, though it is as much like it as a crab is to a crab. Shales and other television critics are thus constantly being put in the position of Dr. Johnson when asked to decide whether Derrick or Smart was the better poet, but without Johnson's recourse: "Sir, there is no settling the point of precedency between a louse and a flea." Ah, but there is you know. The popular culture has thrown up a generation of critics who are practiced in doing nothing else.

Caryn James, the television critic of *The New York Times*, is quite as bright as Tom Shales. She writes, more appreciatively than he, about "Angel" and "Roswell" together, that "vampires and aliens offer a lighthearted approach to the estrangement of youth." These two series, she says, "bring a sardonic wit to the genres they at once inhabit and send up, slyly using escapist fantasies to address what really matters in high school and college: finding love and an identity." True, the new season is lousy with escapist fantasies about teens "finding love and an identity," but in Miss James's book "Roswell" is the best of the new shows because of its "sharp writing." And what does this sharp writing consist of? Well, after describing how, in the first episode, a secret alien brings back to life a human girl who is shot dead in the New Mexican town where some people claim a flying saucer crashed in 1947, she describes how the show's scenario unfolds:

> Although the details don't emerge until next week's episode, it turns out that Max, his sister, Isabel, and their close friend, Michael, survived the Roswell crash in a suspended state. They awoke in 1983, looking like normal 6-year-old humans. Max and Isabel were adopted by loving, middle-class parents; Michael lives in a trailer with his rough, neglectful foster father (setting up many possibilities for the economic differences that can be so painful in high school). Now the aliens have reasons to think the Government is after them; they wonder if there are other survivors of the crash; they share an abnormal taste for Tabasco sauce.

Now there's sharp writing for you.

Never mind. The important thing, as for all sitcoms, is the moral of the story, and "the show's central theme is addressed to teen-age Earthlings: no one is unimportant. As the heroine writes in her diary next week, 'Even I, Liz Parker, the smallest of small-town girls with the simplest of lives, even I have something to hide.'" As Miss James rightly points out, this is also the theme of "Angel" and its parent series, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," both of which, though admittedly exotic in other ways, are said to be relevant to the lives of ordinary teenagers. In the new season of "Buffy," for example, "the heroine and all her friends enroll at the fictional Sunnydale branch of the California university system, where a nervous Buffy wonders if she can make it as a slayer in a college."

I wonder if Miss James—or Mr. Shales or any of their critical brethren—ever stops in the middle of writing a sentence like that to ask, "What am I doing?" Does it ever occur to them that there are some things which do not rise to the dignity of being subject to criticism? To criticize junk television (which is to say television *tout court*) is an act which by its very nature implies a degree of substance that television does not possess, just because it is television and substance is constantly being overwhelmed by the demands of the medium. "Shallow people, shallow show," writes Shales of "Wasteland," a new show on ABC which, he says, "offers up a 'Friends'-like cast of characters who are nothing more than hollow shells masquerading unsuccessfully as human beings." But is that meant to suggest that the characters on "Friends" are not joke-machines masquerading unsuccessfully as human beings?

At one level, it is funny when he goes on to claim that "the ensemble of castaways on 'Gilligan's Island' had more wit, charm, and sophistication" than the hapless characters of "Wasteland"—"And even more depth."

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But this kind of review tends to undermine itself as the comparisons always tend to remind us of the almost equal shallowness of everything else on television. Caryn James, too, says that "'Wasteland' wants to be a dramatic version of 'Friends' with Zeitgeist pretensions. Those pretensions will cause trouble every time." True enough, perhaps, but whatever a "Zeitgeist pretension" may be, the Zeitgeist itself is there for our perusal in both, and both are exercises in a culturally terminal triviality, whether or not they may pretend to be anything else.

Television shows are closer in nature to propaganda than to art. They are avowedly created for manipulative purposes—always the enemy of art—and their success depends entirely on the success of the manipulation. Television critics may pretend to ignore these purposes in order to concentrate on what would be art, if there were any, but they are always being drawn back into evaluation of the manipulation rather than the work itself. Thus Caryn James stresses the usefulness of the new teen fantasies on television in aiding the quest for "love and identity." The same week, a cover story in *Entertainment Weekly* by Ken Tucker (followed by an eight-page summary of every episode in the series and an interview with the series' creator, Joss Whedon, and his co-writers) pointed to the social utility of his favorite show, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Tucker writes,

> With remarkable speed *Buffy* became that rare kind of TV programming: a show whose characters grew only more complex (and—rarer still—not even necessarily more likable), and one in which episodes began adding up to a rich, expansive mythology that could accommodate any comment Whedon and company wanted to make on contemporary culture. . . . Whedon's vision draws from the conventions of teen film comedies, cutting-edge comic books, and cinematic horror series such as *Friday the 13th* to provide viewers with an easily identifiable structure and a heroine to whom they can relate. Sure, Buffy is earth's current Chosen One—the latest in a centuries-long line of demon slayers (all female, we might add). Yet for all the show's fantasy trappings, she's more realistically drawn than any other teenager on television. Her good looks and super training don't help her with failing school grades, teachers who've pegged her as a problem child, and a mother who can't fathom the burdens of dating an undead guy. Time and again, Buffy (as smartly played by Sarah Michelle Gellar) takes on heavy-duty, life-and-death responsibilities, giving the lie to the current cliché of adolescents as self-absorbed, work-phobic louts. Indeed, other than a variation on "Jolly good show!" from her Watcher, she gets zip for saving the world from hell's hounds. Think of Buffy as Whedon's take on *Reviving Ophelia*: building a girl's self-esteem by first acknowledging the validity of her woes, and, second, suggesting she attack her fears head-on, lest she drive a stake into her own heart.

There it is in a nutshell. "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" may be an utterly preposterous exercise in childish wish-fulfillment fantasy, but at least it offers a positive image of contemporary teenagers and may conceivably do something for the "self-esteem" of real teens (at least the stupider among them). Whedon himself, not too surprisingly, endorses this view of the show. Asked in the interview if he considered Buffy to be a "feminist role model," he answered: "Absolutely. The idea was, let's have a feminist role model for kids. What's interesting is you end up subverting that. If she's just an ironclad hero—'I am woman, hear me *constantly* roar'—it gets dull. Finding the weakness and the vanity and the foibles makes it fun."

Fun, maybe, but no more real. In fact, the little touches of realism—Buffy's trouble with schoolwork or undead boyfriends—only serve the purpose of mocking our residual if much-battered expectations of seeing something on television that looks vaguely like real life. And, just by the way, they mock the whole idea of the "feminist

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role model" which can presumably be as well-satisfied with the slaying of fantastical vampires as of real injustices. The important thing from the critic's point of view is not that such shows should have any tethers to reality or even that their moralizings and manipulations should actually accomplish anything. The important thing is only that they should offer us the right moralizings and manipulations.

This is as true of the shows that purport to be for adults as for those frankly directed at children. Television critics have hailed "Once and Again," the new drama on ABC by Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz, the creators of "thirtysomething," "My So-Called Life," and "Relativity," as the new hope of adult programming. Yet if you watch it you will find that it makes precisely the same assumption of every raunchy sitcom featuring young singles looking for sexual gratification, namely that (as Robert Samuelson puts it) "being grown up means thinking exclusively about sex." It's just that, here, it's not young single people thinking exclusively about sex but middle-aged, divorced people. Needless to say, the thoughts all depend on the culturally approved principle that pre- and extra-marital sex must be considered to be as permissible and even desirable for adults as they are for teenagers, so long as they are engaged in "responsibly" (i.e. with a condom) and both parties are "ready."

One must suppose that there is some perceived social utility in the constant repetition of the same lesson by the media's schoolmasters; but as in the case of real schoolmasters and professors, their social function can be quite negligible and even counterproductive so long as their views are pretty closely aligned with each other and of a broadly "progressive" cast. Televisual "entertainment" may be sold by the yard and consumed without regard for such subtleties as the likes of Mr. Shales or Miss James or Mr. Tucker may purport to find in it, but being on television at all is recognized by everyone to carry with it the most solemn kinds of responsibilities (chief among them the obligation not to offend progressive pieties), and to serve as a kind of social validation for those lucky enough to get there.

That is why the most "controversial" aspect of this television season has had nothing to do with its ever-"edgier" content. Once the ultimate destination is recognized, the creep towards pornography is inherently uninteresting, each incremental advance on explicitness only a nine-days wonder. Instead, what has the public prints abuzz is the under-representation of "minorities" on television. Kwesi Mfume, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, called the new season a "virtual whitewash," and was swiftly seconded by other "people of color" whose own media celebrity gives them a platform to speak from. "We seem to be regressing now," says George Takei, the Japanese-American actor who played Mr. Sulu on "Star Trek" all those years ago. "This all-white season feeds into the delusions of white supremacists. It sustains the perception that, no matter how many years we've been in this country, we're not really American." Earl Ofari Hutchinson, a syndicated columnist and the author of *The Crisis in Black and Black* (Middle Passage Press), writes of "the blatant ethnic cleansing in network TV."

No wonder that, as Ed Morales of *The Nation* puts it, "In an era when seeing themselves reflected in the media is essential to people's psychological well-being and very sense of identity, the exclusion of people of color from television shows is an inhuman act"! Now you might think that, if nonrepresentation among the cast members of "Sabrina the Teenage Witch" or "Two Guys and a Girl" constitutes an inhuman act, our age has little to fear from man's fabled inhumanity to man. A case might even be made that the aesthetic inhumanity inflicted on those who do appear on such shows is worse than the moral inhumanity of being excluded from them. That I would take to be as true behind the camera as in

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front of it, since being an actor at least carries with it certain perks, including the prospect of celebrity. Yet Felix Sanchez, president of the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts, is quoted by Corey Takahashi in *Entertainment Weekly* as saying: "This is civil rights in the media age. This is our Selma. . . . The hiring, promotion, and retention of minorities in executive suites is of critical concern to us."

Selma, mind you, without the dogs and fire-hoses. But just because the media apparently believe our social problems to be small ones, that's no reason peevishly to object to their being blown out of proportion. That, after all, is what television does. That and pretend to agonize about its own moral uprightness and social conscience. Sandra Tsing Loh, writing in the "Arts and Leisure" section of *The New York Times* on "The Unbearable Whiteness of Prime Time," asks the big question. Does the dearth of minority-group members on television represent "racism, bigotry, some not-so-subtle Aryan plot?" She concludes that they are not. Quite the opposite, in fact, since "98 percent of [television executives] are white and live in the canyons, yes, but . . . are literally the nicest and most progressive-minded people I've met (we're talking AIDS walking, breast-cancer-ribbon wearing, Lakota Sioux sweat-lodge sitting)."

Corey Takahashi comes to a similar conclusion, quoting Paris Barclay, a black producer of "NYPD Blue" and "City of Angels" as saying that "The decision makers in television are people who live in Bel Air and Malibu and Brentwood. . . I don't think it's racism. They're just not sensitive to the fact that America looks different from the America they may be living in." Not that they're not willing to learn. As Miss Tsing Loh says, "most television executives are embarrassed at this turn of events because, paradoxically, their deepest desire is never to offend anyone ever." That is why there has been a vigorous if belated effort to rectify the situation. Aaron Sorkin, producer of a new drama series about a fictional but Clinton-like U.S. president, played by Martin Sheen, ("You have a once-in-a-generation mind, Sir," his black military physician tells him) and his wacky White House staff, says that "There'll be black faces, Asian faces, Latin faces, men, women all over the place. Are we a little late to the party? Yes we are." But by golly they're coming. Soon it will doubtless be said of Mr. Sheen's cabinet, as was once of Mr. Clinton's, that it "looks like America."

Interestingly, both sides in the "culture wars" seem to have a stake in the epic struggle for the barren turf of prime time. Just as organized victims of one sort or another (Miss Tsing Loh celebrates the fact that persons "of size" have made breakthroughs on "The Drew Carey Show" and "The King of Queens") launch their attacks on the networks from the left, the moralists are moving in from the right. Concerned parents and other advocacy groups have been joined by thirty-three major advertisers of the "Family Friendly Programming Forum" to promote more of the sort of saccharine fluff that *they* like—like "Touched by an Angel" or "Seventh Heaven," which are always cited by the religious objectors as what they think all television should be like—and are having some success.

This success is presumably helped along by the fact (reported by Mark Lasswell in *The Wall Street Journal*) that, after successive years in which the networks have competed with each other to be more daring in their use of sexual innuendo, "the slate of new, even gamier programming this fall has been a flop."

> Now that every witless variant of "Seinfeld" has been explored by platoons of smirking urban singles, a renaissance of family-friendly programming may be afoot. In August, *Variety* reported on a scramble for family-friendly sitcoms: ABC is eagerly casting about for a show that will recapture the family audience that was drawn to "Home Improvement," now that the reliable hit has ended its run. Executives at NBC, having already proclaimed family-themed shows a priority for the

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2000–01 season, said a third of its sitcoms in development revolve around family life.

Hooray! At last it may be hoped that families, like "minorities," will get an equal share of the televised crap.

Ken Tucker begins his paean to "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" by writing: "Week in, week out, first run, and rerun," the show "is always a pleasant shock. I almost wrote pleasant *schlock*," he adds archly, "which isn't the insult it might seem." Isn't it now? That reminds me of Governor Jesse Ventura of Minnesota, the former wrestler who recently said, by way of backtracking from his position (in a *Playboy* interview) that religious believers are "weak-minded," that he wasn't to be thought of as saying there was anything wrong with being weak-minded. After all his wife, who goes to church, is weak-minded too. So that's okay then. Governor Ventura, like Joss Whedon and Charles Saatchi (who was responsible for the "Sensation" exhibition), presumably knows what it takes to get noticed in the media, so he also must be supposed to know what qualities, weak-mindedness among them, the media culture would be glad to rehabilitate. No wonder calling something "schlock" is no longer the insult it might seem.

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *The Moon and Other Failures*, poems by F. D. Reeve (Michigan State University Press, $17.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Fiction chronicle

Silence, exile, cunning

by Brooke Allen

Worldwide preparations for New Year's Eve, 1999 are so feverish that it seems appropriate to stop and ask ourselves just what, exactly, is being celebrated. Not the birth of Christ, at any rate: scholarly consensus has long had it that Christ was actually born in 3 or 4 B.C. The real millennium, in other words, occurred quietly and without incident several years ago.

So are we celebrating the beginning of a new millennium, or, more reasonably, the end of the most horrific century in human history? After a hundred years in which every possible ism—including idealism—and even human nature itself appear to have been discredited, it's hard to approach the festivities with much enthusiasm. The mood, for anyone who gives the matter much thought, can only be prematurely crapulous.

The collapse of political idealism and the many intractable political messes that pollute the globe have provided rich material for a number of current novels. Take the case of Ireland, one of the century's prime crucibles of political failure, a region, like Palestine, so warped by past errors that present diplomacy seems useless, and where the accrued layers of pride, chauvinism, and mythmaking on both sides of the conflict have further botched the chance for a reasonable dialogue.

Roddy Doyle, the forty-one-year-old Irish author whose previous novels (which include *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* and *The Commitments*) have not been pointedly political, has done what has until now seemed impossible: he has written an honest and even disaffected book about the period from the 1916 Easter uprising until the proclamation of the Irish Free State in 1922, shattering dearly held nationalist fantasies and being none too easy on the British and their supporters, either. *A Star Called Henry*[1] is the first volume of a projected trilogy, *The Last Roundup*.

The trilogy will follow twentieth-century Irish history as lived by one man, Henry Smart, born in the Dublin slums in 1901. Henry, we are given to understand, is meant to personify the Irish nation during this century. It is not exactly a new idea; most readers of *A Star Called Henry* will be reminded of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Doyle has borrowed not only Rushdie's gimmick but also a lot of his magic realist trappings as well: stylistic affectations that are entirely unnecessary, and annoying to boot, in Doyle's essentially realistic scheme. By virtue of his character and situation Henry Smart is already a metaphor; the author has no need to draw our attention to the fact so crudely.

Fortunately, though, Doyle gets most of the magic realism out of the way in the first fifty pages or so. By the time Henry is five years old he has left his hopelessly drunken

1 *A Star Called Henry* by Roddy Doyle; Viking, 342 pages, $24.95.

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mother and taken to the Dublin streets, and the novel becomes what it will continue to be: a sharp picture, laconic yet vivid, of a cruel and violent time.

Henry is the son of a second-rate Dublin bouncer and hit man. The world he is born into is a pitiless one; he is baptized, for instance, before he is even named.

> God waited for no baby in the slums. He took them back as soon as he'd given them, but He threw them away if their souls were still stained. He delivered them soiled but expected them back spotless. It was a race. Each day was a fight and a triumph, an endless race to stay a few inches in front of the greedy hand of God. God's gift, Original Sin, had to be washed away in case God sent another of his gifts—fever, typhoid or whooping cough, smallpox, pneumonia or rats.

As a child Henry is mere slum scum, scrounging for existence in a city of Dickensian poverty. Such a childhood educates him to be not so much a nationalist as a class warrior. As a small boy watching the stately procession of King Edward VII and his retinue through the streets of Dublin, he shouts out an enraged "Fuck off" to the monarch. "Why had I told the King of Great Britain and Ireland to fuck off?" he asks. "Was I a tiny Fenian? A Sinn Feiner? Not at all. I didn't even know I was Irish. I saw the procession . . . and saw the fat man at the center of it. I saw the wealth and color, the shining red face, the moustache and beard that were better groomed than the horses, and I knew that he didn't come from Dublin." Henry is strong and sharp and he is able to survive, but he knows that he and his like

> were never going to prosper. We were allowed the freedom of the streets—no one gave a fuck—but we'd never, ever be allowed up the bright steps and into the comfort and warmth behind the doors and windows.

By the time he is a teenager the rootless Henry is ripe for recruitment by some leader or other; in the event he gets scooped up by the republicans. Easter of 1916 sees him in the uniform of the Irish Citizen Army, storming the Dublin Post Office under the leadership of men who were to go down in the Irish national narrative as heroes and martyrs: Michael Collins, Padraic Pearse, James Connolly.

Henry is an enthusiastic recruit, not because he is a nationalist ("I didn't give a shite about Ireland," he says) but because of his rage against the status quo and his place within it. He dislikes his fellow volunteers, whom he dismisses as well-fed farmers and shopkeepers, and reserves special contempt for those he dubs the "rosary boys": "my colleagues and comrades," he observes during the fighting, "my fellow revolutionaries, were on their knees—and they'd been on them and off them all day—with their eyes clamped shut, their heads bowed and their cowering backs to the barricades. What sort of country were we going to create?" When it is Henry's turn to wield a gun, he betrays the real object of his rage by his unconventional choice of targets.

> I fired at Noblett's window, and the cakes and cream jumped out of their stands. O'Farrell's. The glass fell onto the tobacco and cigars. . . . Two for Lewer's & Co. and their little boys' blazers, suits and knickerbockers. . . . One for the All-Ireland Servants Registry Office—there'd be none of that shite in the new republic. . . . I shot and killed all that I had been denied, all the commerce and snobbery that had been mocking me and other hundreds of thousands behind glass and locks, all the injustice, unfairness and shoes—while the lads took chunks out of the military.

As an obscure youth, Henry is able to escape the vengeance of the British in the aftermath of the uprising; while most of the leaders are imprisoned in England or shot as traitors, he lies low and spends the next three years as an anonymous dockworker. Eventually the I.R.A. tracks him down and puts him to use; this time, older and more susceptible to the power of rhetoric, he sees

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himself as an Irish nationalist, ready "to fall dead for a version of Ireland that had little or nothing to do with the Ireland I'd gone out to die for the last time." Henry is set to work indoctrinating new recruits and disposing of "spies."

But as home rule comes closer and the eventual departure of the British is seen to be inevitable, Henry begins to understand that the new Ireland will not be run by patriots and idealists but by power-brokers and thugs, not so very different from the old ones. The political revolution has not, after all, cleared the way for a social one, and none of the men of the slums or hovels will join the big shots in the new Irish Parliament. "We were nameless and expendable. . . . We followed orders and murdered." And in any case will Ireland be a better country, he finally wonders, after the English go? Maybe not, replies a local warlord who is fast establishing himself as one of the leaders of the new Ireland, but at least it won't be English. Henry realizes that for three years he, like his pathetic father, was nothing but a hired killer. The volume ends with him forsaking the republican cause and leaving for Liverpool; in the second volume, it seems, he will emigrate to America—at least temporarily.

The debacle over Algerian independence was another of our century's disgraces, a botched operation in which millions of lives, both Arab and French, were blighted. Claire Messud's new novel *The Last Life*[2] may take place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but its key event is the French exodus from Algeria in 1962, a trauma that casts a pall over many of the novel's characters, even those too young to have experienced it.

Sagesse LaBasse, the narrator of *The Last Life*, is fourteen years old at the novel's opening, a well-liked and to all appearances normal adolescent. The provincial LaBasses pass for somebodies in the coastal town on the French Mediterranean where Sagesse's grandfather, Jacques, owns a hotel. As a young man Jacques dragged himself out of the lower-middle class by dint of hard work and ambition. He left North Africa somewhat ahead of the other *colons*, recognizing that the tide was moving inexorably against them, bought land in France and built and developed his business cannily. Thirty years later he and his wife are prosperous, smug *bons bourgeois*. He still runs the hotel, with his middle-aged son Alexandre as a humiliated subordinate. Alexandre and his American wife, Carol, live in muted disharmony with Sagesse and her younger brother, the brain-damaged, wheelchair-bound Etienne.

The one trait every member of this miserable family has in common is that they all feel cripplingly *dépaysé*. The senior LaBasses, having spent the first half of their lives in Algiers, "returned" to a France that regards all *pieds-noirs* (the French colonists born in North Africa) with hostility as bigots and racists. "Enlightened" France, Sagesse reflects as she becomes slowly aware of this truth,

> found my grandfather's politics heinous; . . . they found our history ghastly too, an insidious pollutant in the aquarium of French honor. France's error made flesh, the *pieds-noirs*, and with them, the *harkis*, were guilty simply for existing. In the national narrative, my father's family was a distasteful emblem, linked, by circumstance, not only to the vicious undeclared war of their homeland, but in dark historical shame to the collaborationists of Vichy and, further back still, to the ugliest excesses of the Dreyfus affair.

The LaBasses don't see themselves that way, of course. They don't vote for Le Pen and the National Front but, they say, they can certainly understand those who do. They cling to the "*certaine idée de la France*" that went out with De Gaulle's bitter last years, a debased and self-destructive notion of French exceptionalism; like other French citizens on both the left and the right they are busy constructing a "national narrative"

2 *The Last Life* by Claire Messud; Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 352 pages, $24.

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in which Algiers and Vichy make sense in the treasured context of French *gloire*.

Alexandre had clung more tightly to the fantasy of a future in Algeria than his parents. A mere teenager at the time of their departure, he decided to stay on, only returning to France when no possible alternative remained. Handsome but weak and stupid, he has wasted his life in sexual dalliance and in simultaneously resenting and submitting to the dominating father who, "Kronos-like," devoured rather than nurtured his children. Alexandre captured Carol when she was an ignorant college student in a cashmere twin-set; a pathetic local Lothario, he was nevertheless, to her, France incarnate.

Carol has had seventeen years to regret her choice. Shackled, by the existence of Sagesse and especially the helpless Etienne, to her philandering husband and her cold, contemptuous in-laws (for whom to be American is by definition to be second-rate), Carol attempts to survive by transforming herself into a certain type of Frenchwoman, the sort of paragon who dresses, cooks, and entertains impeccably, supports her man at all costs, and subordinates her ego to the family good. The type has for some time, unbeknownst to Carol, been extinct, but she soldiers on, oppressed by her family and intimidated by the well-heeled matrons that throng the town, women with "eggplant-colored hair, immovable and shiny."

Messud has been extravagantly praised in the press for her lyricism. She certainly deserves praise, but not, I think, for mere lyricism, which always comes a little too cheaply and easily at any but the very highest level. Where Messud outstrips the competition is in her tenacious grip on psychological realism; she plumbs the moral shallows of her characters with a brutal regard for honesty. The novel's social gatherings, whether *en* or *hors de famille*, are observed with cruel wit, and Sagesse functions perfectly as observer and chronicler. She has all the adolescent's disdain for adult hypocrisy and self-justification; she notices every damning detail but is miserably aware that she herself is no better, that she possesses nothing of value, as the saying goes, with which to replace their degraded behavior and mores.

Messud is marvelously adept at showing the dreadfulness of the elder LaBasses and their sycophantic little circle, and equally so in the scenes she has set in the United States, where Sagesse is sent to ride out a period of family trouble with her mother's family in a rich Massachussetts suburb. There is the falsely cheery, politically correct Aunt Eleanor: "We want you to feel right at home," she tells Sagesse; "We have only a few rules: consideration for others, help when asked, and keep your sense of humor." There is Eleanor's pussywhipped househusband, Don, and their rebellious daughters (rebellious, though, only in a conventional, Sarah Lawrence-ish way). All these are first-rate creations, representing America's moral deficiencies as neatly as the LaBasses represent France's.

Messud's characters are neither attractive nor sympathetic, but while the author clearly doesn't hold them in very high esteem neither does she show contempt. They all receive at least some measure of pity; they all show occasional gleams of worthiness, of qualities that might once have developed into strengths. Whether it be from weakness, rigidity, or simple inertia in the face of history's hostile currents, the LaBasses all bring about their own ruin. The end of the novel sees a new, and probably equally disastrous, shake of the dice: with the death of Alexandre, the once-passive Carol sloughs off her shackles (including the hapless Etienne, who is packed off to an institution), marries a rich suitor, and retires to a villa in Nice. Before long she, too, has eggplant-colored hair. Sagesse, in the meantime, has begun a permanent and self-imposed exile in America.

The notion of exile has become such a standard trope in postcolonial writing that the mere sight of the word on the page can make you want to gag, while the pose of

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the exile has been metamorphosed into a very contemporary version of dandyism, a fashion Messud follows a little too closely. The novel contains, too, a long and awkward rigmarole about St. Augustine and Camus, Algeria's most famous sons, and their unfulfilled visions of, respectively, a city of God and a harmonious city of men. It's not that these two men and their ideas aren't pertinent to Messud's theme, simply that she is mistaken in thinking she has to make that theme so explicit: in fact the significance of what she is saying is already perfectly inscribed within the story itself.

Take, for instance, Sagesse's behavior after she has invited some Algerian school friends to her family home (while her parents are supposed to be away, naturally). She regrets her spontaneous invitation the moment it is out of her mouth, fearing, with increasing agitation, that Sami, the school drug-dealer, might get drunk, break or steal the precious *bibelots*, even piss on the carpet. The contrast between these apprehensions and the reality of the visit, with the perfectly decorous Sami drinking a coke in the living room and admiring the view, says more about the situation between former *pieds-noirs* and *indigènes*, now all exiles together in a hostile and foreign land, than Messud ever achieves with Sagesse's lengthy, retrospective philosophizing.

The Czech writer Ivan Klima, born in 1931, has suffered under totalitarian regimes for a large portion of his life. Imprisoned as a child by the Nazis, he spent four years in the Terezin concentration camp. For almost all of his writing career, his internationally acclaimed fiction was banned by the Communist regime, and when his novels were finally published in Czechoslovakia in the mid-1990s they met with indifference and even hostility from a populace suspicious of foreign taste, of writers and artists who had found success in the Western world.

Reviewing Klima's novel *My Golden Trades* in 1994, John Bayley wrote that the author was in the process of learning to write without Communism. Yes; but perhaps it would be fairer to say that we, as Western readers with our own shopworn clichés about East European dissidents, should learn to *read* Klima without Communism. It is a distinct possibility that Klima's writing has been political more because of the circumstances of his time and place than because he is himself a political animal. He is in fact and has always been a very personal artist, intensely concerned with love, intimacy, and the intricate fabric of everyday life. His selection of short stories, *Lovers for A Day*,[3] just published in this country, shows his work, in spite of the Communist collapse, to have remarkable continuity.

Except for one story dating from 1987, half of the stories in *Lovers for a Day* were written in the 1960s, half in the 1990s. All of the early stories dwell on two themes: sexual love and the limitations life almost arbitrarily imposes. Some of these limitations can be blamed on the Communist regime: "Heaven, Hell, Paradise," for instance, tells of a political fugitive who has secretly returned from his exile in England to visit his lover in Prague, and describes his terror, his certain knowledge that outside the hotel room in which they make love the authorities are waiting to arrest him. But most of the limitations Klima writes about are the sort that any person, in any country, might suffer. "The Assembly Line" details a young man's grim daily routine and the fleeting, glittering visions that haunt it. "Honeymoon" shows a secretly unhappy affair between an aging man, attempting with this love to rouse his life "to a final shout before the silence that was already stealing up on him every night," and a younger woman who, he knows, is only playing with him. "Execution of a Horse" tells of a depressed young clerical worker whose boyfriend, a self-satisfied student, treats her with degrading carelessness. As in Klima's best work, the girl's experiences are

3 *Lovers for a Day: New and Collected Stories*, by Ivan Klima, translated by Gerald Turner; Grove Press, 229 pages, $24.

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universal, yet they still point indirectly at the local situation, in this case the Communist fantasy of the classless society.

> I'm not a student. I won't build bridges, I won't reel off the names of kings or dynasties or study nine symphonies and it makes no difference, no difference at all. My kingdoms are white and pink cards in a hall with pale blue light and brushing off my skirt every single day at four-thirty. I'll brush off my skirt tomorrow and live in hope of a glimmer of merciful consideration if he happens to turn up.

The 1990s stories in *Lovers for a Day* are not dissimilar in either tone or subject matter to those written thirty years previously; if they can be said to have a unifying theme, it is the odd and often inexplicable nature of the bonds that are formed between strangely matched people. In "A Baffling Choice," for instance, the twenty-six-year-old Marie Anna turns from the affections of her appropriate but rather hollow young husband to those of a retired, solitary bookbinder—a sixty-five-year-old cripple—living alone in her apartment block. What can explain such a baffling choice? Then there is the theatrical director Michal Vrba in "Uranus in the House of Death," an intellectual and a realist whose subconscious fears and yearnings are brought to light, much to his own surprise, by the astrological predictions of his goofy girlfriend. In "The White House," a strong, successful student dallies with a blind girl, chafes as she becomes dependent on him and feels guilty about the future moment when he will, of course, dump her, but then finds that it is in fact he who now depends on her.

All of these stories are nuanced, precise, and blessedly underwritten. It seems that the fall of the Communist regime has not radically affected the quality of Klima's work; it ought simply to make his life easier and his fine, subtle fiction popular one day —we can only hope—in his native land.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

God and the Victorians *by Roger Kimball*
The legacy of E. H. Carr *by David Pryce-Jones*
Robert Musil's diaries *by Eric Ormsby*
Thomas Hardy & American poetry *by David Yezzi*
Willa Cather's *The Professor's House by Donald Lyons*
Hazlitt & Wordsworth *by Martin Greenberg*
Translating Rilke *by John Simon*
Interpreting World War I *by Keith Windschuttle*

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Books

Arts of power

by Paul Dean

For over thirty years Brian Vickers has been a leading figure in Baconian scholarship—the genuine kind, not the bogus kind connected with the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. His Oxford Authors volume of 1996, bringing together Bacon's major English works, is now complemented by an edition of *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, a work he did not then include.[1] It is not the first modern edition—indeed, one by Jerry Weinberger appeared from Cornell as recently as 1996; but Vickers, while properly grateful for Weinberger's scrupulous analysis of Bacon's treatment of his narrative sources, is also properly censorious about his misguided view of Bacon as a prophet of modern democracy and technological tyranny. Vickers's edition—crisply introduced, fully annotated, meticulously glossed, and appending Bacon's fragmentary histories of other Tudor monarchs, together with five of the *Essays*—now becomes the standard one.

Bacon wrote the 75,000 words of the *History* in fourteen weeks in 1621, but he had been thinking of the project for many years. Lamenting the poor quality of modern historical work in the second book of *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), he pointed to the lack of a single comprehensive history of Great Britain, adding that if this were thought too great an undertaking, "the story of England . . . from the Uniting of the Roses to the Uniting of the Kingdoms," i.e., from the accession of the first Tudor king, Henry VII, in 1485 to that of the first Stuart king, James I and VI, in 1603, would make an engrossing subject. In the enforced retirement which followed his dismissal from his post as Lord Chancellor on a charge of accepting bribes (a dubious affair in which he was made the scapegoat for discontent with his political master James I), Bacon seized the chance to show what a thoroughly up-to-date historian he could be. He also, by presenting himself as an elder statesman whose experience remained valuable, hoped to recover some influence at court. Only in the first of these aims did he succeed.

Bacon's theories of historiography involved him in a dilemma. As Vickers explains in his introduction, Bacon shared the Jacobean vogue for Tacitus with his emphasis on secret causes and hidden motives, yet also admired contemporary historians such as Machiavelli, who, to quote from the *Advancement* again, wrote "what men do and not what they ought to do." This involves a contradiction neglected by Vickers, for Bacon was thus simultaneously committed to showing the unvarnished truth and also to suspecting that there may have been more to it than meets the eye. His Henry is a plain dealer, a wise lawmaker and parliamentarian, and also a clinical observer who keeps his own counsel and whose

1 *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, by Francis Bacon, edited by Brian Vickers; Cambridge University Press, 284 pages, $19.95.

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thinking is often inscrutable. In a venerable metaphor, vigorously exploited by one of Bacon's predecessors and sources, Sir Thomas More, political behavior is seen as theater: public gestures which may be illusions, speeches which may be scripted. A major example of the consequent ambiguity is Bacon's treatment of the royal pretenders of Henry's reign, Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck. This is the part of the work which is of most interest to us, not only because of its literary quality but also because of its self-reflexiveness. It poses the question: what and where is historical truth?

Having defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth, Henry had won the crown by force of arms, but he was well aware that his title was technically weak. There were rumors that one or both of the sons of Edward IV, the so-called "Princes in the Tower," had not after all been murdered on Richard III's orders but had survived. Their claim would supersede that of Henry, and Edward's widow, Queen Elizabeth, who had her own circle of sympathizers, was quick to exploit his vulnerable position. Lambert Simnel in 1486 and Perkin Warbeck between 1491 and 1499 both claimed to be the younger son, Richard Duke of York, and Warbeck at least was taken seriously, to the extent of being believed by James IV of Scotland. Simnel later changed his claim and said he was Edward Plantagenet, Edward's IV's nephew: he was actually crowned Edward VI at Dublin in 1487. Henry's position was fragile, for he could not easily denounce these men as imposters without risking the countercharge that he was one himself. The problem was not that they were royal while he was not, but that he, just as much as they, was forced to act a part—an embarrassing fact to which he did not want attention drawn.

Both episodes are for Bacon "stage-plays." The defeated Simnel is spared by Henry and put to work in the royal kitchens: "he turned a broach [spit]," comments Bacon grimly, "that had worn a crown," a reversal of the normal order of things whereby "fortune commonly doth not bring in a comedy or farce after tragedy." Warbeck posed a graver threat and was a more complex character. Unlike Simnel, he needed no prompting from the wings: he "could make his own part if any time he chanced to be out." Bacon even speculates, fascinatingly, that he may ultimately have been sincere, although deluded:

> Nay himself, with long and continued counterfeiting and with often telling a lie, was turned (by habit) almost into the thing he seemed to be, and from a liar into a believer.

This is a piercing insight, but implicitly damaging to Henry VII's cause, for Warbeck emerges as an antitype of the king, who may also have turned himself, by frequent repetition of a lie, into "the thing he seemed to be."

The Lord Chamberlain, Sir William Stanley, whose tactics at Bosworth had saved Henry's life and who had personally placed the crown on the victor's head, was found to have been a Warbeck sympathizer and was executed. Bacon's comments on this are brilliantly penetrating: Henry, he suggests, was irritated at owing Stanley a debt that could never be repaid. This was unwise of Stanley, since "convenient merit, unto which reward may easily reach, does best with Kings." Bacon goes so far as to say that Stanley's service was "like the benefit of Christ, at once to save and crown." It may be Henry then, not Stanley, who acts the role of Judas, feigning shock and sorrow at his old ally's treachery. Besides, when one considers the nature of Stanley's offense,

> the cause for which he suffered . . . was little more than for saying in effect that the title of York was better than the title of Lancaster, which was the case almost of every man (at least in opinion) . . . no man thought himself secure, and men durst not commune or talk one with another, but there was a general diffidence everywhere; which nevertheless made the King rather more absolute than safe. For

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bleeding inwards and shut vapours strangle soonest and oppress most.

"Little more"! Considering that Bacon was angling to recover the royal favor, this passage is breathtakingly risky. For a few moments we are in the world of Shakespeare's *Richard III* (and also Sir Thomas More's, who was one of Shakespeare's sources as well as one of Bacon's). Who is the real king, who the imposter? In a world where Tacitus practices Machiavellianism and Machiavelli preaches openness, how can we ever know?

This is Bacon's prose at its best. But his mind, although never less than forceful and fluid, is not Shakespeare's, and a reading of the *History* merely reinforces one's bafflement at how anyone can think otherwise, or why they want to. Nor, for all his scholarship and experience of government, can he really be compared to Shakespeare as a political thinker or analyst; if he read the history plays, he seems to owe them little or nothing. The insight quoted above is the best thing in his book. Yet though an unresponsive pupil, he was a stimulating master; his work inspired John Ford to write the last, belated, great English Renaissance history play. *Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth* (1634) picks up Bacon's hypothesis that Warbeck may have come to believe his own story, and presents him as a figure of tragic dignity, far more regal than Henry, and his death as a waste rather than a just punishment. "Be men of spirit!," he exhorts his co-conspirators as they leave for their executions. "Illustrious mention/ Shall blaze our names, and style us kings o'er death."

For Ford's Warbeck, royalty of mind is greater than the name of king, because it confers upon its possessor an imperishable crown. Only fifteen years after his play, and twenty-three after Bacon's death, Charles I stood on a scaffold himself, perhaps thinking exactly that: while Andrew Marvell, commemorating the king-cum-martyr-cum-tragic actor in his "Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland," distilled the essence of Bacon's work into a Baconian aphorism: "the same arts, that did gain/ A power, must it maintain."

A profligate's reserve

J. R. Ackerley My Dog Tulip.
Introduction by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas. New York Review Books, 190 pages, $12.95 paper

J. R. Ackerley My Father and Myself.
Introduction by W. H. Auden.
New York Review Books, 283 pages, $12.95 paper

reviewed by David Yezzi

Typical of the zoophilist who favors life's lower orders over humankind, Robinson Jeffers claimed he'd sooner kill a man than a hawk. While one can imagine an instance when this would prove tempting—a particularly noisome cad or deserving fowl—most people, I think, refrain from adopting it as a policy. An animal activist in later life, J. R. Ackerley (called Joe) so preferred the company of his ill-behaved Alsatian bitch Queenie that he often chose her above his friends, who despite their affection for him could not abide his yowling, four-legged ward. Tired of accommodating the unruly beast on visits to the country, Ackerley's chums left off inviting him altogether. "Best friend" hardly delimits the power of Queenie's hold on this particular man; she was the dearest thing in his life. "I shall never stop missing her," Ackerley wrote after Queenie's death in 1961, "no human being has ever meant so much to me as she meant." Why this should be the case heavily informs this pair of memoirs, reissued by *The New York Review*, which has recently taken to reprinting books in addition to noticing them.

Lauded as a minor master by contemporaries and friends such as Evelyn Waugh, Elizabeth Bowen, Vita Sackville-West, and

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Cyril Connolly, Ackerley may be garrisoned among the army of underachievers that Connolly described in *Enemies of Promise* (1938). Never wavering from the path of minority, Ackerley nonetheless managed to lodge a few quirky volumes in the corpus of classics. As he tells us at the opening of *My Father and Myself*, he was almost twenty-three when his parents married in 1919. Ackerley takes this chronological discrepancy blithely in stride: "Nearly a quarter of a century may seem rather procrastinatory for making up one's mind, but I expect that the longer such rites are postponed the less indispensable they appear and that, as the years rolled by, my parents gradually forgot the anomaly of their situation." The anomalies of Ackerley's own situation, however, readers are not likely to forget.

Ackerley began *My Father and Myself* a few years after his father's death in 1929 and completed it in 1967, the year before his own. The book presents a handy bit of family detective work in which Ackerley discovers more had been going on in his father's life than success in the fruit business, a prosperity that won him the title of the "Banana King." If his father had made such a killing, why had he left so little money behind? By the time Roger Ackerley married Joe's mother, it turns out, he had sired three children by another woman, Murial, whom Joe first encounters as an anonymous figure at his father's deathbed. Roger's "secret orchard," as he called his second household, was disclosed only after his death by means of a letter unearthed in a drawer. Spurred on by his curiosity for the missing pieces of this increasingly labyrinthine story, Joe also discovers that his father as a young man had been the (platonic?) intimate of the flamboyant Comte de Gallatin and that his father's fatal illness at sixty-six was brought on by a case of syphilis contracted years before.

W. H. Auden, writing for *The New York Review of Books* in 1969, pointed out that in *My Father and Myself* Ackerley "strictly limits himself to two areas of his life, his relations with his family and his sex-life." Auden's review, which was reprinted in his *Forewords and Afterwords* (1973), serves to introduce the NYRB's current edition. Of Ackerley's homosexual pursuits, Auden makes much, bemoaning the omission of exactly what went on in Ackerley's bed. "My guess," Auden wrote, "is that at the back of his mind lay a daydream of an innocent Eden where children play 'Doctor,' so that the acts he really preferred were the most 'brotherly,' Plain-Sewing and Princeton-First-Year." Auden was responsible for landing these two terms in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: the first defined as mutual masturbation, the second as the practice of rubbing oneself between another's thighs. (Though the graduates of that illustrious Garden State institution with whom I'm acquainted claim to have no idea of the meaning of this last reference.)

The self-confessing aspect of Ackerley's dual portrait leads him at one point to a rather poignant admission: frustrated with his prospects of reaching sex through love, after graduating from Cambridge, he "started upon a long quest in pursuit of love through sex." Ackerley's years of cruising compliant guardsmen and other subsidized companions grew out of his search for the "Ideal Friend" and ended only with the acquisition of Queenie, at which point Ackerley's relentless sexual urges apparently subsided. *My Dog Tulip* (1956), based on his life with Queenie, comprises the fluid-smeared particulars of rearing and breeding the dog that was to become Ackerley's great love: "The fifteen years she lived with me were the happiest years of my life." Ackerley, in a tribute traditionally reserved for long-suffering spouses and stalwart colleagues, dedicated *My Father and Myself* to her memory.

While *My Father and Myself* contain a number of pages on the hapless sexual pursuits of Ackerley *fils*, the chronicles of Tulip-Queenie's exploits prove much more scabrous. Chapter two, winkingly titled "Liquids and Solids," begins: "In the journal of General Bertrand, Napoleon's Grand

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Marshal at St. Helena, the entry occurs: '1821, April 12: At ten-thirty the Emperor passed a large and well-formed motion.'" Suffice it to say that in the sphere of Ackerley's regard Queenie is treated like an emperor. For those with an interest in canine defecation and micturition, this chapter provides absorbing reading. For those who find it unpleasant to hear detailed the bowel movements—in parks, on sidewalks, on terraces, in guest rooms—of a decidedly high-strung German Shepherd, one may want to skip ahead. It will do such a reader little good, however, since what follows is a painstaking account of Tulip's veterinary visits and mating practices ("The Turn of the Screw"). Needless to say, Tulip is far from placid: she draws blood not only from Ackerley but also from two bus conductors and a postman and outrages not a few veterinarians. Here's Ackerley, still new to dog ownership, heading off to one doctor's appointment:

> When I set out with her I was already unnerved by the struggle that lay ahead. Nor were my drooping spirits raised by the first sight that greeted us, a spaniel who was being treated as we arrived. . . . He was standing quietly on a table with a thermometer sticking out of his bottom, like a cigarette. And this humiliating spectacle was rendered all the more crushing by the fact that there was no one else there. Absolutely motionless, as with an air of deep absorption, the dog was standing upon a table in an empty room with a thermometer in his bottom, almost as if he had put it there himself.
>
> "Oh, Tulip!" I groaned. "If only you were like that!" But she was not.

As his biographer Peter Porter points out, Ackerley's technique was to jolt the reader into laughter and disgust, the second often provoked by the first. He aimed to shock, and his success was heightened by the soap-bubble sparkle and lightness of his prose. Nauseous disclosures are dropped in with a dandy's poise. Ackerley gets great mileage out of the often creepy intimacy of dog and master: as a counter to suspicions of sexual shenanigans between the two, Ackerley, despite his denials, admitted to a bit of "finger work" in conjunction with breeding her. (As Porter notes, Ackerley once returned an author's manuscript smeared with Queenie's menstrual blood.) He enjoyed meting out discomfiting observations with a profligate's reserve, the writing at once probing and fastidious—and hilarious.

It should be said that, despite their striking sexual candor, by today's standards Ackerley's books are marked by relative restraint. Like his three other books—*The Prisoners of War: A Play* (1925), *Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal* (1932), and *We Think the World of You* (a novel recounting how he came to own Queenie, 1960)—the two here are worked up from life, pieced together from Ackerley's frequent journal entries. The books are not tell-alls, however; names have been changed and persons well disguised (though their identities have since been ferreted out). Such discretion seems quaint today. What writer of a family memoir would forestall publication until after the relatives in question and even he himself had died? Now, of course, it is not enough for offspring to dish dirt on their fathers, they must sleep with them as well. Compared with the current memoirists' disregard for propriety, Ackerley was the soul of discretion, taking care to paint his clearly fallible father in a sympathetic light.

In addition to publishing his thin, unforgettable volumes, Ackerley served for nearly thirty years as the literary editor of *The Listener*, the weekly magazine of the BBC. During his tenure there, he published colleagues and friends such as Clive Bell, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Wyndham Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, as well as Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, Auden, and C. Day Lewis (or MacSpaunday, as Ian Hamilton refers to them collectively). E. M. Forster was one of his closest confidants, and he often advised Ackerley on his love life, always toward caution and moderation, the kind of advice

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Ackerley rarely followed. Though Forster is quoted in *My Father and Myself*, his identity is withheld. (Forster, by the way, was one of Queenie's greatest detractors.)

Similarly, in *My Dog Tulip*, Ackerley conceals the name of another acquaintance, referring to him pseudonymously as Captain Pugh, in whose house Tulip soils a carpet. As if this weren't bad enough, the mess is then trod through the halls by an unobservant housemaid. Pugh, it turns out, is Siegfried Sassoon, a great admirer of Ackerley's play about the First World War. (Ackerley's descriptions of war—he was twice wounded—and his meeting with his brother Peter in the trenches in France are among the best rendered passages in *My Father and Myself*.) It is to Ackerley's credit that he never dragged his friends in by name, libel laws notwithstanding. His ultimate subject was himself, and in the candid pursuit of some basic truths about his life and his relationships he was unflinching, revealing himself as alternately amusing and bitterly disappointed. If Ackerley was his own harshest critic, his substantial gift was his ability to pronounce sentence on himself with inimitable wit and charm.

Serious about books

Henry Petroski
The Book on the Bookshelf.
Alfred A. Knopf; 294 pages, $26

reviewed by John Derbyshire

Going out on a limb here, I shall hazard a guess that readers of this periodical are more bookish than the average. Probably they have all, like this reviewer, wrestled with the problems of organizing and shelving their books. The subject matter of Henry Petroski's *The Book on the Bookshelf* will therefore be close to their hearts, for this is a survey of, and commentary upon, the many ways that have been devised of storing, retrieving, and consulting books from the ancient world to the present day and on all scales from the domestic to the institutional.

The author is actually a professor of civil engineering, and the Chinese idiom "*San ju bu li ben hang*" is apt: "He can't say three sentences unconnected with his profession." Everything is seen here through the eyes of the engineer—detached, precise, and sober with responsibility, with the awareness of consequences. (In civil, hardly less than in military, engineering, the price of failure can be a heap of corpses.) If Petroski were a less imaginative person, or a less gifted writer, this would make for a very dull book. In fact *The Book on the Bookshelf* is a pleasure to read, stocked with a wealth of fascinating, sometimes astonishing, detail yet never rambling or departing for long from its set course. It is an excellent companion for —could be shelved next to!—Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*.

One of the book's major themes is *light*. Books must be stored where they can be identified for retrieval, and, once retrieved, there must be a place where they can be taken to be read. Both book stacks and reading desks therefore need light, either natural or artificial. Until a hundred years ago, the only type of artificial illumination available was the flame of burning wax, oil, or gas. For obvious reasons, those responsible for storing and displaying books were reluctant to introduce this element into their domain. They therefore did the best they could with natural light; and the design of spaces for keeping and using books, from the individual study cell to the huge institutional library, was for most of history dominated by efforts to maximize incident sunlight. For nearly all of that period this came down to matters of fenestration; at the very end, following improvements in materials science, some minor innovations in flooring were added—metal grilles, as in the stacks of the British Museum Library, or glass, for example at the University of Illinois. (Your glass floor was, of course, my glass ceiling, but the glass used was sufficiently thick and irregular that objects seen above were unclear. "This feature enabled

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women to wear skirts and dresses into the stacks without worry," the author assures us.) Professor Petroski's discussion of library design in the pre-electric age culminates with detailed yet very lucid descriptions of those masterpieces of the form: Antonio Panizzi's British Museum Reading Room and Bernard Green's Library of Congress.

Once electric light became easily available there was no longer any need to bother about directing sunlight onto book surfaces. Inevitably the insights gathered painfully over centuries were discarded along with the problem they had attempted to solve:

> Even when they are readily accessible, books can be hard to see. The ubiquitous availability of electric lighting in the later twentieth century has allowed libraries to install bookshelves with little attention as to how they are arranged with respect to natural lighting, and in some cases this seems to have led to a total disregard for lighting altogether, natural or artificial.

In a chapter titled "The Care of Books," Professor Petroski offers practical advice on the storage of books at home. He has sensible things to say on such topics as the "dead space" created when bookshelves meet at the interior corners of a room, a thing that has vexed me for years. The central problem here, of course, is just that of finding, or creating, shelf space for one's ever-proliferating library. Speaking as a person who cannot bear to throw books out (how I winced at the moment in *84 Charing Cross Road* when Helene Hanff says: "I houseclean my books every spring and throw out those I'm never going to read again." *How do you know you're never going to read them again?*) I was interested to see the author's solution to the problem of where to put them all. I myself have resorted to filling my attic with plastic utility shelving, but the good professor shows me up as a weak-willed amateur:

> [K]itchen and pantry cabinets can be commandeered in the fight to find bookshelf space, and a family's eating habits can be changed. When the china is displaced by paper plates, there is no longer any reason why books cannot be stored in the dishwasher too. An empty refrigerator is an excellent repository for the most valuable of books because books like low temperatures best.

The dishwasher? The *refrigerator*? Here is a man who is serious about books.

He has, I think, also shown an engineer's precision of judgment in his choice of subject. There is just room in three hundred pages to say everything of general interest that can be said about book storage and handling. The author can therefore savor the satisfaction of hearing his book called (by me, at any rate) "definitive." I do not see that there is anything left to say. Did you know that Napoleon had a bookshelf in his carriage, and tossed books out of the window when he had finished them? That in the mid-nineteenth century there was a fad for trompe l'oeil books on bookshelves, often with whimsical titles—*The Scottish Boccaccio* by D. Cameron, etc.? That Gladstone, the Grand Old Man of nineteenth-century British politics, "had strong opinions about how to shelve books"? (I think there was nothing about which he did *not* have strong opinions, actually.) That books were around for 1200 years before they began to be shelved spine outward? All literary, historical, and artistic bases have been touched.

Well, perhaps not all literary bases. In one of his newspaper pieces the late Flann O'Brien invented the trade of Book Soiler. This fellow would, for a modest fee, come round to your house and soil your books, dog-earing a page here, spilling a little coffee there, and making sure all uncut pages were cut, so that your books—and by extension you yourself—looked well-read. I offer this morsel to Professor Petroski for inclusion in future editions of *The Book on the Bookshelf*, in gratitude for a most enjoyable read. Now, where shall I put it?

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Lightkeepers

Bella Bathurst
The Lighthouse Stevensons,
HarperCollins, 278 pages, $24

reviewed by Ben Downing

There have arisen, over the years, dynasties of finance, politics, racketeering, music, maquillage, fireworks, the flying trapeze, and even jiujitsu, but few family businesses have proven quite so prodigious or beneficial to the commonweal as that of the Stevenson clan, four generations of whom built, between 1790 and 1940, ninety-seven lighthouses around the fearsome Scottish coast. As their most famous scion, Robert Louis, panegyrically put it, "Their works, the salt-encrusted, still survive;/ The sea bombards their founded towers." Just how they managed to leave such a briny vertical legacy is the subject of Bella Bathurst's absorbing chronicle.

The background to Bathurst's story is grim: "In the 1790s an average of 550 ships were wrecked every year on British shores," she relates. Caledonian waters were especially treacherous; so often did boats fetch up on certain Scottish rocks that entire villages grew fat from scavenging them. Something needed to be done, and into the breach stepped, not yet a Stevenson per se, but rather one Thomas Smith, first engineer of the Northern Lighthouse Trust, who took on as apprentice his stepson, Robert Stevenson. He it was who launched the family enterprise in earnest by erecting the formidable Bell Rock lighthouse, a feat that captured the public imagination and catapulted Robert into local celebrity; soon he found himself accompanied on an inspection tour by no less a personage than Sir Walter Scott.

Of the four sons begat by Robert, three (Alan, David, and Thomas) followed him into the trade. Not altogether willingly, however—each was chivvied, shamed, indeed all but dragooned by their relentless sire. Despite having been coerced into engineering, the trio flourished at it. Alan in particular eclipsed even his father's achievement with Skerryvore, which, according to Bathurst, "has been described as the most beautiful lighthouse in the world." David, meanwhile, reared his own luminous masterpiece—the northernmost lighthouse in Britain—on a brutal spike of reef delightfully known as Muckle Flugga, and Thomas perched his chef d'oeuvre atop the forbidding offshore rock of Dhu Heartach.

But then, in the third generation, the lineage wavered, with only two of the grandsons (David A. and Charles) consenting to carry the maritime torch. (It was borne into the fourth by D. Alan.) Among the shirkers was Thomas's sickly son Robert Louis, who had been subjected, in his turn, to the now standard barrage of paternal threats and blandishments, and who had miserably knuckled under to three summers of apprenticeship before finally slipping the yoke in 1871. Engineering's loss was literature's gain. The original Robert had dreaded composition, but with Alan, a closet poetaster and correspondent of Wordsworth, an inchoate knack for writing first glimmered in the family; and with Robert Louis it blazed forth like, well, a lighthouse beacon. Possessed of his full quotient of Stevensonian stick-to-itiveness, R.L.S. cranked out one of the period's great—and most undervalued—bodies of work.

Aficionados of that corpus will be disappointed to learn that Bathurst barely touches on it. R.L.S., admittedly, is not the subject of her book. Still, she might have made more use of him. Although Bathurst quotes liberally from *Records of a Family of Engineers* and nods towards *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*—which, she observes, "both contain salvaged traces of his early career"—she declines to embellish her yarn, as she easily might have done, with, for instance, the above-quoted verses. Also passed over are these lines from "The Light-Keeper," written at the age of nineteen or twenty:

> The clear bell chimes: the clockworks strain,
> The turning lenses flash and pass,

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Frame turning within glittering frame
With frosty gleam of moving glass.

As these evocative lines testify, lighthouses pierced deep into R.L.S.'s imagination; small wonder he developed such an obsession with lamps and lanterns.

Whatever *The Lighthouse Stevensons* lacks in literary sidelights it more than makes up for in bravura technical narrative. The book's centerpieces are a series of chapters describing, in thorough yet far from dull detail, the construction of Bell Rock, Skerryvore, Muckle Flugga, and Dhu Heartach, each more daunting than the last. These are labors such as would have taxed Hercules. Work proceeded under appallingly hazardous conditions: Lacerating reefs, waves cresting above an incredible two-hundred feet, and hurricane-force storms that could last for days—all counted among the routine impediments. And as if the elements weren't enough, the Stevensons' endeavors often were hindered by human mischief too. Not everyone viewed the lighthouses as a boon. In building their pharoi, the family disrupted a thriving parasite economy, coming awkwardly between the wreckers and their carrion. Yet another frequent menace was that of the press gangs, always eager to poach crewmen for the navy. (That the Stevensons virtually shanghaied their own children is an irony which seems not to have occurred to them.) Against these massed obstacles the family pitted their courage, cleverness, and almost maniacal assiduity; by hook and despite crooks, they founded their towers.

Bathurst is to be commended for conveying potentially arid information with engaging verve and, still more, for imparting to us a keen sense of the Stevensons' accomplishments. Alas, the same kudos cannot be extended to her publishers. For *The Lighthouse Stevensons* is disgracefully riddled with more typos, and those of a greater egregiousness, than any book I have ever read, period. We're talking sentences that begin in lower-case, "mots" for "most, "tot he" for "to the," and so on: the kind of glitches that wouldn't have gotten by the dimmest chimpanzee. It's as if the Scottish surf wreaked its havoc on the text, washing letters out to sea or else into gruesome collision with each other. How sadly ironic that a book written in homage to heroic perfectionism should be so negligently treated. The inescapable conclusion is that HarperCollins simply never bothered to proofread—a grave insult to both Bathurst and her readers. Fie, HarperCollins! Whoever botched *The Lighthouse Stevensons* should be sent for a long winter to ponder the mickle error of his ways high up in Muckle Flugga.

Soane's tense balance

Gillian Darley
John Soane: An Accidental Romantic.
Yale University Press; 346 pages, $45

reviewed by J. Duncan Berry

The architecture of John Soane constitutes one of the few points of contact between advocates of tradition and innovation in this century. It might be successfully argued that for this reason alone his work merits continued scrutiny. But Soane has not always been so well-regarded, and for the greater part of the time since his death in 1837 he has been regarded as something of an odd duck. It is one of the great accomplishments of Gillian Darley's new biography that the full scope of Soane's life and works can be seen in exquisite detail, thus allowing a fresh perspective on this vexing figure and his ethereal aesthetic objectives.

Darley, a journalist, broadcaster, and preservationist, opens her book with the observation that upon visiting the Sir John Soane Museum—the house he bequeathed to the nation at Lincoln's Inn Fields—people are often struck by the fact that it is "like a journey in someone's head." This opening trope is an extremely clever and wide-reaching device for the biographer,

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because the house accurately reflects its creator's "uncomfortable architectural genius." For many years, I have instinctively associated Thomas Jefferson and John Soane, thinking of both as architectural autobiographers: in their homes, one encounters a combination of material evidence of a visionary's intelligence and ineffable traces of idiosyncratic self-absorption. Darley is sensitive to the psychological dimension of Soane's work, and, without making explicit connections, her extremely thorough research and critical sympathy enable one to come away with both greater respect for his achievement—and greater curiosity.

Among the book's many virtues is the surprising facility with which the author has handled Soane's often complicated integration of professional ambition with private affairs. From cultivating potential clients while still on a grand tour to hosting London's political and cultural elites, Soane's life, his intensity, and his focus are captured admirably. A dutiful and adoring husband, but at the same time a rather pro forma vestryman, Soane's personal life fascinates like few of his contemporaries' can. His activities as a Freemason, linking him to an entire world of iconographic, moral, and architectural associations that held men in thrall all over England, the continent, and across the Atlantic, are not handled with a similar degree of conscientiousness, but this still hermetic area of research has not even yielded to an accomplished scholar like David Watkin. The Masonic thread remains vital throughout this period, and Soane's family's continuing connections with other prominent Masons—Mozart's entourage for instance—demand more serious examination. For Darley to mistake the embroidered symbols of his officer's apron for the plans of a Freemason's Hall is a palpable example of why this topic still beckons.

Following in the mode of Christopher Hussey's monumental life of Sir Edwin Lutyens, Great Britain's other leading classicist, Darley traces the architectural heritage and ambiance of Soane's birthplace, contributing significantly to a much more

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finely grained image than was possible even just a decade and a half ago with Dorothy Stroud's biography. Darley's tenacity in tracking down every possible scrap of evidence linking England's incredibly close worlds of culture, finance, and literature enables her to draw connections and see patterns of human interaction and interest that make this a stunningly informative effort. Given the painstaking care that Darley put into crafting this compelling narrative, one must wonder why Yale University Press persisted with some odd academic economies including the absence of a bibliography and unusually terse endnoting while using gorgeous stock and dozens of lavish color illustrations.

Admittedly, Darley does not dwell on the architectural significance of the work per se, but her often extensive presentation of a given work's patronage offers a rich source for consideration in reassessing Soane's artistic growth and development. It remains to be seen just how the changing fortunes of his family life may have affected the way he approached the design of residences (or tombs), for instance. The choppy waters of his family life make for compelling, if somewhat tragic, reading; one cannot be but heartbroken over the sheer treachery of his younger son, George. One sees in the human wreckage around Soane evidence of a megalomaniacal streak that perhaps made the tense balance of his architectural imagination possible. In all, this is not only a splendid read—for it is decidedly that—but also a spur to greater interpretive work on this "accidental romantic."

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Reflections

Gooseberries

by Theodore Dalrymple

Children do not much care for gooseberries. As a child, I thought them an inferior fruit. In part, this was because of their color: pale green, while I thought that a real berry ought to be red. Also, they were extremely sour: so sour, indeed, that—as the Germans say—they draw the holes in your socks together. For some reason that I now cannot recall, I conceived the idea early in my life that it was weak and ignoble to sweeten fruit with sugar. Even now I experience a vague feeling of guilt on doing so. If God created gooseberries sour, it was because He wanted them eaten sour.

Gooseberries were always served in the England of my childhood with custard, a disgusting yellow concoction with lumps in it and a skin that sent shivers down your spine. The lumps and skin were evidently regarded in the same light as outdoor team games in inclement weather: that is to say, they were character-building. Meals in England in those days were treated as an ordeal that had to be gone through; nowadays, thanks to an increased awareness of the health implications of nutrition, they are more like medical procedures.

I spent a surprising amount of energy in my childhood evading not just gooseberries but gooseberry bushes. Our garden was terraced, with some luxuriant bushes on one of its levels. My brother and I devoted a lot of effort to pushing each other into them: but since he was the older and stronger, he was the more successful in his endeavors. I came to associate gooseberries with scratches and indignity.

During my adolescence and early adulthood, I forgot about gooseberries, until I read the short story of that name by Chekhov. Written in 1898, it is not one of his greatest works, but it nonetheless had a deep effect upon me because it resonated so strongly with my own life. "Gooseberries" is the story of a minor civil servant, Nikolai Ivanovich, who spends his bureaucratic career dreaming of a country estate, where he will live the life of a landowner and drink soup made of home-grown cabbages. Essential to his dream are gooseberry bushes: "He could picture no manor house, no country idyll, without gooseberry bushes."

His salary is small, and therefore he becomes a miser. To save money for the estate, he dresses in rags and deprives himself of proper food. He marries an old and unattractive widow for her money, which he transfers to his own account, and he allows her none of the comforts to which she is accustomed, so that she is obliged to live in his reduced fashion. Before long she dies, and eventually he accumulates enough cash to buy his estate. There is no gooseberry patch on the estate he buys, and so he plants twenty bushes. The story's climax—if that is quite the word for a Chekhovian denouement—is the first harvest of gooseberries from these bushes:

> Nikolai chuckled, and contemplated the goose-

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> berries silently and tearfully for a minute—his feelings too deep for words. Then, putting a single gooseberry in his mouth, he looked at me [the story's narrator] with the glee of a child who has at last been given a longed for toy.
>
> "Delicious."

The point of "Gooseberries" is the ironic contrast between Nikolai Ivanovich's mean-spirited pursuit of his goal and the smug satisfaction to which its attainment gives rise. For the sake of his triumphal but petty enjoyment of a few gooseberries—both sour and unripe, according to the narrator—he has inflicted suffering not only upon himself but upon others. In having sacrificed for so long enjoyment of the present for a thoroughly worthless vision of the future, he has become so desiccated and devoid of human feeling that the pleasure he takes is as appalling as the cruelties he has inflicted.

If life imitates art, its mimesis is imperfect. My father was not Nikolai Ivanovich precisely, yet there were enough parallels for "Gooseberries" to mean more to me, perhaps, than to most readers. For many years, my father ran a business that hovered in that large area between success and failure. Fundamentally, money did not interest him much: what he wanted more than anything was the power to dominate and humiliate the small circle of people around him. Heaven only knows what early wound meant that the tyrannical discomfiture of others should have been balm to his soul, for he never spoke of his early life except in the most guarded and censored way. But his conduct in his office was abominable.

He could never be mistaken, there or anywhere else. Once, he gave the handwritten draft of a letter to his secretary and she returned it to him with a word typed differently from how he had written it. She stood by her correction and he ordered her to look it up in the dictionary. She was proved right, whereupon most men would have shrugged and admitted their error. Not my father. "Get another dictionary!," he ordered, and she was despatched to the nearest bookshop to buy one.

He raged at his staff, requiring no pretext to do so except that the mood was upon him. He behaved as if he had been bitten by a mad dog, or suspected that he was surrounded by thieves. He hurled abuse at them and slammed doors. There was always an undercurrent of violence when he was in the office. And he made sure his insults were always uttered in public.

Two men in particular were the objects of his wrath, Mr K. and Mr B. Mr K. was slightly deaf, and protected himself against my father's rage by turning off his hearing aid. Mr B. had not such means of protection and bore my father's insults with patient humility. I did not find Mr K. or Mr B. as contemptible as my father evidently found them. In fact, I much preferred them to him. Sometimes I would walk in Regent's Park with Mr B. during his lunch hour. He was a slow, stolid man with a furled umbrella and shoes so polished you could see your face in them. He had one remarkable talent, which was to look at a page of figures (in those days we still had undecimalized pounds, shillings, and pence) and add them up in his mind, far faster than they could be entered into the adding machines of that era.

He had always been good at figures, he said, which is why the army had employed him to count the bodies on the ground after the Battle of El Alamein. He also told me that he had once shot a German soldier dead, just (he thought) as he was about to surrender, and his conscience had troubled him about it ever since. I learnt from Mr B. that a humdrum exterior does not necessarily preclude interesting memories. And since I suspected that my father had avoided military service during the war from cowardice, I found his incessant bullying of Mr B. all the more reprehensible.

But there was another aspect of my father's character that I found as puzzling as his violent outbursts against people who had done him no harm and upon whose

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work he relied for his livelihood: he would spend many hours in the garden, tending his plants in absolute silence and solitude. He said that one day he would retire to the country, there to devote himself to gardening and cultivating fruit and vegetables. He wouldn't miss London a bit: nor, apparently, the terrorization of his staff. I didn't believe him.

One day, however, he was offered enough for his business that he never had to work again, and he did retire to the country, entirely on his own. His domineering behavior ensured that he had few visitors, and that those few he had left as soon as possible. He seemed to be under a compulsion always to say something wounding or derisive, and never praised anyone or anything unequivocally, as if it might detract from the resplendor of his intelligence or the perfection of his judgment. He thus spent the last twenty-five years of his life cultivating a garden whose beauty was for his eyes only.

Among his cultivations were fruit, and among his fruit were gooseberries. His harvest was always far greater than he could consume, but there were few people to accept his gifts of the fruit, which consequently went entirely to waste. Thus the end product of all those years of temper tantrums, deliberate humiliation of staff, and uncontrolled passion amounted to countless bowls of picked gooseberries destined to be thrown away. And just like Nikolai Ivanovich, my father found his gooseberries delicious, quite unlike any others.

My father died, and so I thought no more of gooseberries. Then, one day earlier this year, I opened my newspaper and there, in color, was a reproduction of a still-life painting of gooseberries. Not only that, but it was by a late seventeenth-century Dutch painter, Adriaen Coorte, who actually specialized in depicting this humble fruit (as well as strawberries, asparagus, and sea shells). His picture was on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, as part of an exhibition of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life paintings. I resolved to go.

Coorte was not a great artist; great artists do not limit their subject matter quite so strictly. He was not even admitted to the guild of artists that would have allowed him to sell his pictures freely in the town of Middelburg, and he was once fined for trying to do so. But yet his little picture of gooseberries on a stone ledge (now permanently on display in the Cleveland Museum) has a strange power to move the viewer profoundly.

In this, it partakes of the power of the entire genre. It is curious how the minute and loving depiction of humble, everyday objects should so strongly arrest us. I remember the effect that a still life by Juan Sanchez Cotan had upon visitors at the entrance to an exhibition in London of Spanish still lifes. It was as if they had been struck physically: they stopped dead in their tracks, their eyes wide open. A young Japanese woman actually gasped. Sanchez Cotan had painted a quince, a cabbage, a melon, and a cucumber in a parabola framed by a cold gray stone window: that was all. But I have never seen any picture have so strong an immediate effect upon those who saw it.

I was not surprised to learn that Sanchez Cotan was a religious man: or indeed that he joined a lay brotherhood later in life. For his depiction of these humble products of the earth is clearly reverential (in a way that is perhaps only possible in an age of scarcity), an act of worship. He teaches us—as many still-life painters do—to see all heaven in a grain of sand and to be thankful for the gift of life. Even someone completely without religious sentiment—such as I—feels it stirring in the presence of such works of art.

The Dutch, no less than the Spanish, still-life painters were reverential towards the everyday objects of their people's sustenance. For example, the picture of a beaker of beer, a roll, a knife, and a salt herring on a pewter plate by Pieter Claesz is painted not only with brilliant technical accomplishment, but also with the deepest respect

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for the world about him: a respect alike for products of nature and for those of man. Indeed, the contrast between the intensity of the depiction and the quotidian nature of the depicted is what gives the picture its enormous power. It makes us see the world anew.

There couldn't be a starker contrast, either, between the outlook of the still-life painter and that of people who take our modern material abundance for granted. The latter do not find anything remarkable or worthy of notice in the everyday, and are therefore driven by their lack of powers of contemplation to seek brute sensation. Since the sensational itself soon becomes all too abundant and therefore quotidian, ever-greater sensation must be sought if ontological boredom is to be kept at bay. This tendency is all too clear in Amsterdam itself, among the most liberal (and not coincidentally the most violent) cities in Europe, where there is a constant but self-defeating search for new taboos to break and shibboleths to utter. And lest anyone should refuse to accept the contrast between the culture that produced the Dutch still lifes of the seventeenth century and the Dutch culture of today, which is indistinguishable from most modern cultures except that it is more self-consciously extreme in its rejection of refinement, it is worth remembering that Dutch still-life painting was not an elite, but a popular art (though of course Coorte and Claesz were distinguished practitioners of it): and that if that art had been as popular in America today as it was then in the low countries, American professional artists would have painted approximately 175 million still-life paintings this century.

Adriaen Coorte's minutely observed and portrayed gooseberries are not, therefore, a trivial or contemptible subject matter for art. The sprig of the bush on which they grow teaches us to observe the play of light upon the foliage, to take delight in the variety of shades of green to be seen in the various leaves—no, even in a single leaf. As for the translucency of the berries themselves, so miraculously beautiful, and captured so tenderly by the artist, one feels like exclaiming, as T. H. Huxley did on reading Darwin's *Origin of Species*, "How stupid of me not to have thought of that!" Except, of course, that it is not thought alone to which Coorte appeals, but to a whole way of looking at things, literally to a Weltanschauung. How stupid of me—I felt like exclaiming in front of his tiny painting—not to have noticed that! Gooseberries were not more translucent in his day than in mine; and yet, through willful blindness, I had not seen this translucency, or if I had seen it, I had not noticed its beauty.

So now I am thoroughly reconciled to gooseberries as a fruit, and will never again think of them as sour and distasteful. They are, after all, an instance of the beauty of the world. And yet honesty compels me to admit that other thoughts connected to gooseberries rise unbidden to my mind. Like Nikolai Ivanovich, I dream of country retirement. I have had enough of my inner-city medical practice, and long for peace and quiet, to live in a cultured atmosphere where people do not destroy themselves by evil habits and vile conduct to stave off their existential ennui. It is true that, unlike Nikolai Ivanovich, I have no desire to grow my own gooseberries: but couldn't my longing for *la France profonde*, for Umbria or Andalusia, just as well be another metaphorical plate of home-grown gooseberries?

And a further gooseberry metaphor occurs to me. In English parlance, to be a gooseberry means to be left awkwardly at the margin of a social event such as a dance or a party. A gooseberry is *de trop*. And when I look around me, at the culture of modern Britain, I feel increasingly that I am a gooseberry. Is it my age, or is it true this time that civilization really is coming to an end?

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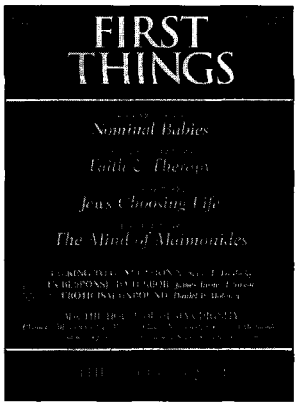

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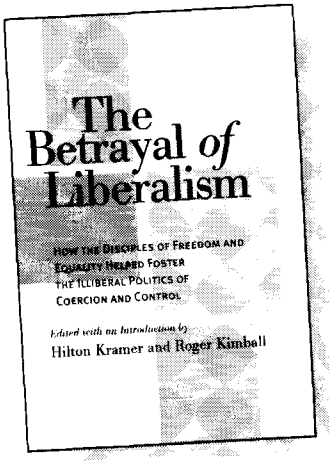
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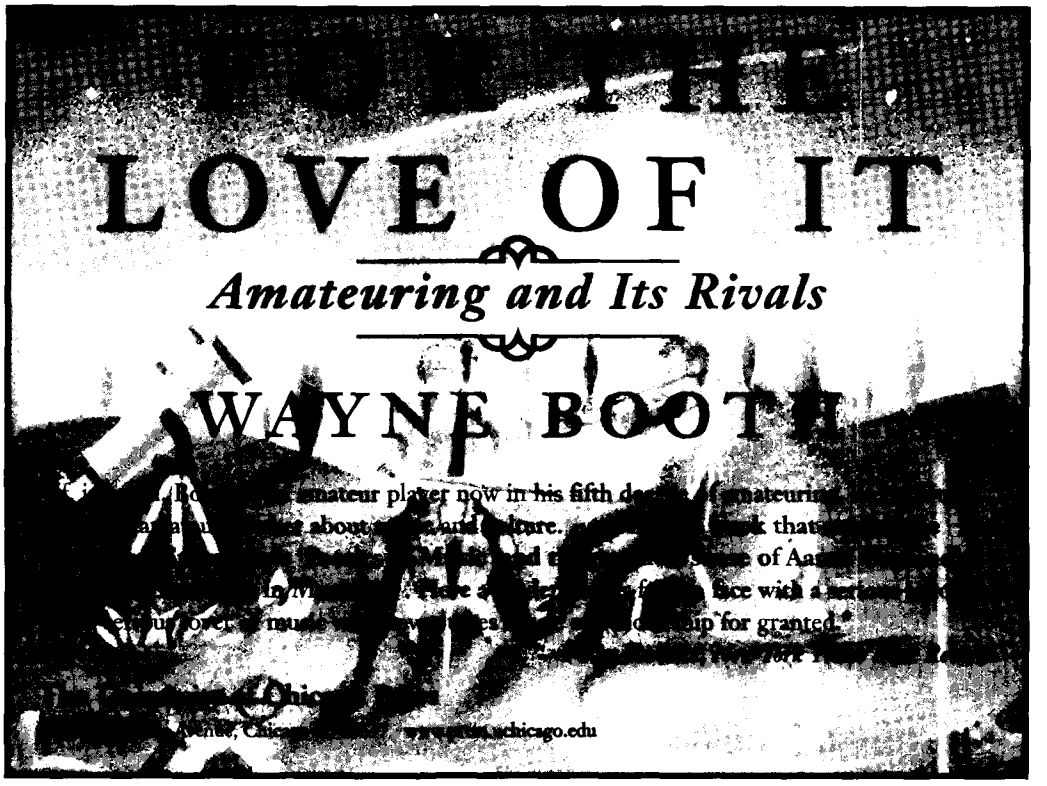

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